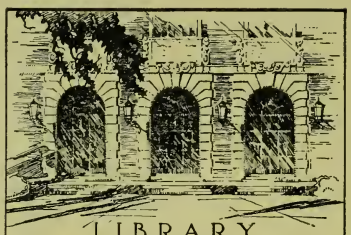
LOVE'S LABOUR WON

JAMES GRANT



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LOVE'S LABOUR WON.

A Novel.

BY

JAMES GRANT,

AUTHOR OF "THE ROMANCE OF WAR," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. III.

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LOVE'S LABOUR WON.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE FORTUNE OF WAR.

We must now return to Montague Lonsdale and his comrades, whom we left, five chapters back, in the vicinity of Minhla, and who were now proceeding up the river against the next formidable town, Myan Gyan.

The Calcutta mail had just brought Montressor a letter from Claire. How Lonsdale envied him, for no letter from Rose Cottage had yet come to shed a little light upon his way; but the bugles were sounding now for the troops to "fall in," and Montressor, with all his affectionate anxiety, had to pocket his half-read epistle for perusal at a more fitting time.

As usual, the mail brought no letter for

Lonsdale. That one posted so surely and lovingly by Melanie never reached him, by the course of events at the capture of Ava, as we shall show ere long.

"I wonder why hand grenades have gone out of fashion. They would be of right good use in the jungle here, or wherever we have bush fighting. I have heard my father speak of bouquets of them, quilted with fuses outward, being fired from the mortars in his time," said Lonsdale, as he surveyed the dense luxuriance of the teak forests and their undergrowth that bordered the river, up which the ships with the troops on board were steaming steadily and merrily. And rumour already whispered of a column being detailed for the capture of the Ruby Mines.

The very name suggested much to excite cupidity. Lonsdale thought of Melanie, and whether it could be possible, in this most prosaic age of the world, to achieve wealth by the effort of an hour.

Who is there that has not dreamed of sudden riches—sudden as those that fell to the lot of

Aladdin or Monte Christo? He smiled to himself as he thought of how love excited a vague emotion of acquisitiveness, even in him. But "to become rich suddenly, and without effort, by the result of some splendid stroke of chance, has been a dream with millions," we are told. "Such a method of enriching the heroes of romance has been fashionable since the days of Sinbad. It is one of the stock devices of romance, simply and purely because it chimes in with one of the stock dreams of human nature."

By the realisation of such a dream, the wealth even of the owner of Ravensbourne Hall might be far eclipsed, and the most greedy and ambitious aspirations of Mr. Grimshaw and Mrs. Chillington be more than satisfied.

But Mandalay, north-east of which lie the hundred square miles of the far-famed Ruby district—one regarded with much akin to fear and veneration by the Burmese—was not just then within the general's scheme of operations.

Theebaw, who had not as yet been deposed, was still "Lord of the Rubies," and when he wished

to impress on a visitor an idea of his vast wealth, was wont to make him thrust his arms into the great jars of rubies and sapphires, that stood in his treasury like sacks of corn in a granary. Rumour made some of these stones to be of fabulous size, equal indeed to that famous ruby in exchange for which Kublai Khan offered a magnificent city.

It was impossible for Lonsdale not to speculate on what might occur if he was sent on the expedition referred to. A few handfuls might give him and Melanie all they wanted in the world. To her they might bring a new life—a new existence with all her love for him, and all she could ever have longed for in her crushed and somewhat sordid girlhood, with the power to aid the poor and the suffering—that power she longed for most; but neither Montague Lonsdale nor Montressor were fated, as the event proved, even to see the ruby mines of King Theebaw.

A strong force of the enemy were said, and found to be, at Myan Gyan, a town situated on the left bank of the Irawaddy, and one of great importance,

as it is alleged to have extended for two miles along the river bank.

It then contained many houses of priests and gaudy temples, the scarlet and gilded pagodas of which rose above the brilliant greenery of the surrounding forests; and it was famous in the wars of the Burmese and Peguens, as it was distant only ninety miles from the capital.

About four in the afternoon of the 24th November the flotilla came in sight of the town, which was seen to crown a high bank—all the higher owing to the state of the river at that season of the year—and affording most favourable ground for the erection of three long batteries, which, in European hands, might have knocked the flotilla to pieces, and could not have been searched out easily with shell.

The country around is level and open, and overlooked by an isolated hill, the secluded abode, according to Burmese superstition, of dreadful fiends and demons.

The royal troops in Myan Gyan mustered about five thousand strong, and they held a number of

rifle-pits—probably the suggestion of their Italian engineers—and some guns in battery on the plain below the town, and therein their gilt umbrellas and *papier-maché* helmets, adorned with the fire-vomiting dragons and so forth, could be seen above the earthworks when the Irawaddi, the Kathleen, and the gunboats opened fire on the latter with shells, the hoarse explosion and ghastly gleams of which soon elicited dreadful yells and shrieks of rage and dismay; and these increased after the pestilent Nordenfeldts and Gardiners came into action. But the Burmese seemed for a time resolved to hold their ground.

Meanwhile, after partially silencing the defences of the lower part of the town, the ships, after dusk fell, steamed slowly past the long, entrenched batteries, receiving and replying to their fire in quick succession till anchoring to the north-westward, from whence they could enfilade the whole line, which they continued to do till far into the night.

Lonsdale and Charlie Danvers, on the bridge of the Kathleen, smoked their cigarettes, heedless whether their white helmets, tipped by the moon-

light, might afford marks for the Burmese riflemen, and watched together the weird effects of the heavy banks of sulphurous smoke, streaked ever and anon by the sharp and brilliant flashing of the great guns and the red sparks of exploding shells, to both of which the wonderfully clear radiance of the oriental moon on the deep, shadowy grove and the flowing river lent a most expressive accessory; while the flights through the air, or to grovel on in terror on the shining water, of those immense numbers of aquatic birds that hover near the marshes, followed every booming discharge.

So passed the night of the 24th, and on the following morning our troops were landed to storm the positions under fire from the floating batteries.

The whole of the long, wavy grass and dense bushes by the river side seemed alive with musketry, while deep and hoarse came the booming of our 64-pounders, the great shot of which at times went humming over the batteries and trenches into the open ground beyond.

The thin blue smoke of the adverse rifles and

cannons curled through and enveloped the drooping mangroves that fringed the river bank, and rolled along its surface, rising but slowly therefrom, as the atmosphere was close, still, and heavy.

The Naval Brigade threw shells into the enemy's earthworks with wonderful rapidity and precision; but a two hours' bombardment was required to silence the fire from the latter, when the defenders drew off into the jungle, after a severe loss in killed and wounded, while, in that quarter, we had only two Blue Jackets slightly hit; but, hit by one of the last shots that came from the fugitives flying into the jungle, was the giddy young sub., Cecil Travers, the handsome boy attached to the Governor's Body Guards. He fell forward on his face, hit in the heart, and never moved again.

The fire of our machine guns proved especially destructive and terrible. Under it, entire groups of Burmese, in shining helmets and gorgeous tunics of flowered stuff, fell in heaps, from which, perhaps, one or more might be seen to stagger up, or crawl away in agony, only to sink and perish a little further on.

On the flight of the enemy a detachment of the Liverpool Regiment, another of the 11th Bombay, and a company of Sappers were left to form a garrison in Myan Gyan.

Wearied by the events of the day, Lonsdale was returning to the flotilla, which had orders to proceed slowly up the river.

Threading his way in the dusk, where the stems of the ebony and banyan trees stood up in black and opaque outlines against the red and purple quarter of the sky where the sun had set, leaving a flush, as of blood, upon the pools, the swamps, and the currents of the Irawaddy—threading his way, we say, among the dead and wounded, who strewed all the vicinity of the enemy's works, a groan, a voice he knew, arrested his steps; and to his distress and dismay he found that he had nearly stumbled over the thoughtless and heedless young lieutenant, Charlie Danvers, who, like his chum Travers, was also on the general staff, and now lay on his back dying of a mortal wound, with bells of blood and foam oozing from his lips.

Yet he knew Lonsdale, and his eyes, sad and

weird in expression, rested anxiously, clingingly on his face, as the former bent over him.

The lad seemed quite conscious, but unable to speak.

"Poor Charlie—my poor fellow!" escaped Lonsdale's lips unconsciously.

The dying lad, in whose breast the fragment of a shell had lodged, driving the ribs into the lungs, made more than one most painful effort to mutter something that sounded like a farewell message to someone; so Lonsdale bent over him lower still to catch the words, so terribly important now, but in vain.

Then suddenly Charlie raised himself, as if by a superhuman attempt, and while a smile, a wonderful brightness, shone for a moment in his eyes and on his face, he cried, in a strange and broken voice:

"Mother—mother here!"

A visionary and well-loved face had hovered before him for a moment—a moment of happy but distempered fancy, and then he fell back dead.

Lonsdale lingered near him sadly for a moment

or two, and after reverently closing his eyes, turned away in great sorrow. Prayers were not much in his way; thus Byron's line occurred to him:—

All that we know is, nothing can be known.

But poor, thoughtless Charlie Danvers now knew all.

The two young friends were gone; two more lives lost in that remote and almost obscure strife; but it was their fate and the fortune of war.

CHAPTER XLIV.

DACOITEE.

"FORWARD" was still the word, and would be till the capital was reached and the king humbled to the dust.

The Burmese show their fighting qualities best, or only, in the defence of stockades, which, as they are well-skilled in all manner of woodcraft, they can erect with wonderful rapidity in the densest jungle, and protect by almost impenetrable entanglements; and these they can defend with a tenacity and determination that better troops might envy; but no superiority of numbers will tempt them to quit the shelter of such works and trust to valour in the open ground.

To note briefly the events preceding a catastrophe that occurred to Lonsdale, ending still more

seriously to his friend Montressor, we may state, for the coherence of our narrative, that during the advance to Mandalay, and before the expedition reached Ava, Theebaw sent envoys to obtain terms, which were specified by General Prendergast to be — his unconditional surrender, with his army, treasure, and kingdom at large!

To this comprehensive demand an answer was to be given on the following day.

As none was given, our troops took possession of the defences of Ava, with all the batteries, rifle-pits, and the ancient brick-walls which are fifteen feet in height, the Burmese soldiers laying down their arms as ours entered "the City of Gems," as the capital is named, though many of its houses are mere huts thatched with grass. And by the 29th of November the savage Theebaw was a prisoner, and the famous white elephant, with nothing white about him save a couple of dirty spots, was in our hands, together with the royal family, or all that remained thereof after the palace massacres; and then the war was supposed

to be over—a war like most of those we wage now —since we have ceased apparently to cope with Europeans—in which, if danger is great, the glory is small indeed.

Thus, on the night of the 29th, soon after the king, who, like a craven, begged only that his wretched life might be spared, was put on board the flotilla for conveyance to India, the Dacoits began their work with a will. So we have now another tragedy to record.

Prior to the above events, our troops had reached Mandalay, a few miles distant, where, as evening fell, the scene was singularly beautiful.

On each side of the Irawaddy rose its banks, covered with luxuriant foliage, amid which glittered innumerable bell-shaped pagodas and taper spires of varied and fanciful outline, all delicately carved and elaborately gilded, so that they gleamed in the ruddy light of the setting sun like filagree work studded with gigantic jewels.

The first announcement of a treaty of peace was a gorgeously-gilded barge of great beauty, with

fifty golden-bladed oars flashing in light, that shot out from the Ava shore with a great white pennon fluttering in the bow, and high above, a clump of gilded umbrellas, that announced the presence of officers of rank, bearing a message to our general.

Anon, the river widened, and its eastern bank sank low to level yellow sands and grassy inlets, beyond which rose Mandalay, amid the Sham Range of hills, that start abruptly to the height of some thousand feet; and from these it was that the "Golden-footed King" came forth from his palace and, veiling his hatred and loathing, gave himself up to the British troops.

Though fighting with the Burmese regulars was ended, the warfare was still, we say, protracted by the operations of the treacherous, savage, and blood-thirsty Dacoits, an Indian name for those who practise robbery as their hereditary privilege or destiny; and these wretches manifested all the worst traits of the Burmese character, which Captain Franklin describes in his "Notes" as being abjectly servile to superiors, but when "in

power, rapacious and cruel; in war, treacherous and ferocious; in their dealings, litigious and faithless; in appetite, insatiable and avaricious; in habit, lazy; and in their ideas, persons, houses, and food, obscenely filthy, below anything that has claims to humanity."

And these Dacoits inflicted the most dreadful tortures that the most fertile oriental ingenuity could suggest upon all who fell into their hands alive.

In repelling and pursuing a party of them, who had been practising *dacoitee—i.e.*, looting—and murdering in the vicinity of Mandalay, Lonsdale and Montressor, with a few men, had pushed along a path, a mile or two in length, bordered on either side by rather neatly-built houses or bungalows, and little temples containing well-carved but monstrously grotesque idols.

The houses had, in most instances, been pillaged. Some of the inmates, hacked and gashed by many wounds from the bayonet, but chiefly from the sharp, crooked *dao*, lay in them, or about the doorways, where piles of clothing, utensils, jars,

pans, lutch-boxes, water flagons, umbrellas, and other spoil that had been abandoned in haste, lay strewed about.

Here and there lay also a Dacoit, whom the bullets of Lonsdale's party had overtaken, dead or dying, and clad in the usual Burmese costume, a double piece of cloth, about ten cubits long, loosely wrapped about the body, over which was a sleeved frock or tunic that reached to the knees, with a turban-like head-dress.

The Dacoits retired through the jungle, firing back a few parting shots at random as they fled; but one of these struck down Montressor, piercing his chest in the vicinity of the heart, inflicting a mortal wound. He sank heavily down in great agony, and Lonsdale had only time to press his hand and leave him in charge of the only medical officer with the party, while he hurried on with a few soldiers, full of vengeance, in a hot and fierce, and as it proved eventually, a vain pursuit, as among the jungle and tall elephant grass the Dacoits successfully eluded him.

As his party advanced he came upon a Burmese, differently attired from the rest, in a brilliant yellow costume of strange fashion. He was a man of venerable aspect—a non-combatant apparently —who had been struck by a ball in the leg near the door of a little temple, and now lay bleeding helplessly, half in and half out of a pool of water, where he would soon have perished had not Lonsdale assisted him.

"You are wasting time, Lonsdale," said an officer. "What the deuce! Surely we have enough and to spare of Burmese; one less in the world won't matter."

But Lonsdale drew the aged sufferer forth, tied up his bleeding limb with a handkerchief, gave him a draught from his water-bottle, and passed on, thinking no more on the subject, save that the old man's glance of intense gratitude followed him.

Conceiving that he had pursued the looters far enough, he recalled his advanced files and began to return by one of the three parallel roads that lead eastward from Mandalay, just as darkness was

closing and the jungles on either side were growing dark and gloomy.

Full of anxiety for the fate of his old friend and brother officer, he reached the narrow path before referred to, and sought the place where he left him, near the edge of a dense thicket, where the medical officer was still beside him, and after placing a great-coat, rolled up, under his head and applying a pad and bandage to stop the hæmorrhage, was now, together with the hospital sergeant, busy with another wounded man, whose case seemed equally bad; and in answer to an inquiring glance from Lonsdale, the doctor shook his head gloomily and ominously.

Lonsdale thought it was all over with his friend, who was lying there still and pale with the awful calmness of death about him—a smile that seemed almost seraphic on his handsomely-cut, but now blue, lips, and all the intense quietude of man's last sleep on his closed eyelids; and though Lonsdale deemed him gone "to the shore that hath no shore beyond it, set in

all the sea," roused by a sound, the dying man opened his eyes.

"Montague," said he, feebly, "old fellow, are you here?"

"Yes," replied Lonsdale.

"Tell me, please, exactly, what these medical fellows think of me," he asked, in a broken voice, with an interval between every word.

"Think—they think that you are very much injured."

"And won't pull through—oh—I understand. Poor Claire—poor Claire! Speak out, Lonsdale—don't be afraid—but for her—but for her—I could bear it, whatever it may be."

Lonsdale could not bring himself to tell what was too evidently the case, and the dread verdict the doctor's glance implied.

"Speak, am I dying?" Then, ere Lonsdale could form a reply, Montressor said: "You will return to Calcutta after this business is all over—you will see Claire—tell her—tell her—I loved her a thousand times better than man ever loved woman!"

At that moment there was a distant flash, and then a report, and with it came the ping of a rifle bullet—a bullet no one precisely knew from whence; but it struck Digby Montressor on the left temple, and killed him in a moment—yet in that moment, strange to say, true to his soldierly instincts, he had grasped the hilt of his sword, and expired with his right hand within it.

"Follow me!" cried Lonsdale, and he dashed headlong into the jungle, before his soldiers could quite realise the situation. While rushing after him, some fixing their bayonets, and others dropping cartridges into the blocks of their rifles, they saw the flash of a revolver in front—then the noise of a scuffle, and a cry was heard in the gloom.

The soldiers went onward with a rush, but not a trace was to be seen of Lonsdale, and a search discovered nothing among the dense, leafy jungle, and tall elephant grass, but a Burmese sabre—a weapon without guard or hilt—with the blade and grasp both covered with blood.

He seemed to have been spirited away—carried off, no doubt, to be put to death by torture, at the leisure and for the amusement of his merciless captors.

CHAPTER XLV.

A WANDERER.

When Dick Talbot, tingling with pain in every limb, and with his young and impulsive heart filled with rage, humiliation, and bitterness, left the house of his Uncle Grimshaw, he had, at first, no object in view but the vague one of putting as great a distance between himself and that locality as possible; and with this intention he had walked steadily forward, heedless in what direction he went, though not without a certain desire of ultimately making his way to London, where surely "something would turn up."

After a time, as he trod along, he kicked up the dry and withered leaves that lay so plentifully in the country lanes—where is the little boy that does not love to kick up those gathered heaps and see

them career before the wind?—but, anon, heavy thoughts began to press upon him, especially when the afternoon was past and evening began to close.

Save the moan of the east wind, as it swept through the bare trees, there was no sound when the shadows began to deepen, and there seemed—even to Dick's country eyes—something weird in the swaying of the dark boughs against the gloomy background of the sky; and save the robin, every bird was silent now.

What was he to do?—where was he to go? Back to Rose Cottage? No—certainly, never! He paused and looked around him, after proceeding a few miles. In the distance there loomed a church tower darkly against the sombre grey sky. He knew it was that of Woodstock, and that London lay in another direction, so he paused irresolutely.

From more than one thatched barn, he could still hear the flop! flop! of the swung flail, or the whining of the more newly invented threshing machine; he heard, too, the gruntle of the fat pigs

that waded knee deep amid the straw of a farm-yard; and through the windows, as he passed them, he could see the red glances from many a cosy fire, seeming all the redder and more cosy by very contrast with his own homeless condition and the gloom of the fast coming night.

He knew that the hedgehogs and badgers were hid in their holes, the frogs had buried themselves in the mud of their ponds, and that the field mice and squirrels were now shut up with their winter stores, for the time was the last days of chill November. In many respects Dick Talbot was a very simple and essentially a country boy, unaccustomed to the crowded streets, with their taverns, busy shops, their strange and flaring placarded advertisements of amusement and folly. His friends had been the grand old trees by the wayside; the woods, the hedges, and all the feathered tribes that built their nests therein; he knew the pools where the trout lurked under the long bordering weeds; and he knew every bird's egg and every bird's habit, as if he were a trained naturalist.

Bingo whined, as if enquiring the cause of their wandering, and crept close to him.

"My dear old doggie!" exclaimed Dick, caressing his only companion; "Oh, if you could only talk, Bingo, you would be a perfect dog—and what a chum for me! I should want no one else."

Dogs and children—boys especially—take naturally to each other. The dog never cares for others of his species when he has his little master or mistress with him; thus he is alternately play-mate, guardian, and sometimes horse. Be he ever so poor, a dog is a positive luxury to a boy who enjoys his double position of patron and proprietor, and as poor Dick was, just then, poor enough, he and Bingo were all the world to each other.

He now remembered the important part, that—save a few pence—he had no money; he seldom had any, now that Montague Lonsdale was gone.

He could not pay his fare to London, thus, to reach that supposed goal of fortune, he would have to walk fifty miles and more.

Then again he thought—

"When I get there, what shall I—what can I do?"

He shrunk with natural pride, shame, and repugnance from the idea of making his wants known to strangers, who would no doubt flout and scorn him, but the coming night was likely to prove a bitter one. The wind seemed to blow through him, and he stooped his head against the blast, while working his way aimlessly along a deep and muddy road, for in November "The country ways are full of mire," as Alexander Smith, a now forgotten writer, says in one of his poems.

As yet there had not been any sharp frosts, and flowers as tender as single dahlias were still lingering in some sheltered places, but the gardens were shorn of their beauty, and from the woodland scenery even the colours of the autumnal foliage had departed.

A cheerless drizzle had now begun to fall—the same that Melanie was then watching anxiously from a window; and Dick, as he shivered, thought, "Even the rabbits and the birds have homes, but I have none!"

He felt hungry, too; but on discovering a piece of biscuit in a pocket of his round-tailed Oxford jacket, he had not the heart to eat it, for on seeing his dog eyeing him wistfully, he gave it to the latter.

To pass the night on the open highway was impossible, so Dick, on finding himself near some haystacks, burrowed a place in one, for warmth and shelter.

He thought sadly and lovingly of his gentle and beautiful sister, who at that hour—if not busy with him and his tasks—had usually her needle actively employed; and in fancy he could see her soft, shining, dark brown hair, and long dark lashes, by the light of the shaded lamp, and—ugh!—Uncle Grimshaw, with his *pince-nez* balanced on his nose, with his pale, shifty eyes conning the "money article."

How lonely, grieved, and terrified Melanie must be without him! And Reggie too—helpless Reggie! How lonely he was himself, poor boy; as he thought of it all a few natural tears escaped him; and he drew Bingo, his only friend and comrade, close to his side.

And when the dog, chilled with the rain, shivered and whined, Dick thought vengefully of his Aunt Chillington's pet poodle, which slept in a mother-of-pearl basket, that was lined with blue satin, stuffed with down, and had scented pockets round it; and which dined off macaroons and cream, or chicken and meat, minced by the hands of his pampered mistress, or her odious French maid, Clochette.

At last Dick slept, and so passed the first night after he ran away from "home."

CHAPTER XLVI.

SERGEANT HAWKSLEY.

Stiff, sore, and for a time chilled to the marrow in every bone, Dick Talbot awoke betimes next morning, surprised that he did so without any summons fron old Bethia Barlow, and for some moments could not remember how he came to be in such a place, one so strange, and not in his own little room which the kind hands of Melanie had so prettily curtained and decorated for him, so far as her poor means went.

Then he crept forth, and, still resolved to return no more to the abode of his Uncle Grimshaw and the grinding life of taunting neglect and irritation endured there at the hands of that repellant relative, he turned his steps resolutely, if vaguely, so far as purpose went, towards Woodstock.

He had no overcoat, and—ugh!—how cold and

bitter the November atmosphere felt; but his spirits rose with locomotion. The sun shone brightly, and the world, and all that's therein, looked so much better by the light of day than the gloom of a starless night.

As Dick trod on he felt strangely free—free, unfettered, and untrammelled, and the lord of his own person. But how long was that freedom to last? A livelihood was to be won somehow; but not like the newly fledged Claude Duvals and Boy Brigands, of whom he had lately read so much in penny literature.

Hitherto, under Uncle Grimshaw, he had fel somewhat like a hunted creature—cornered—with all the will, but not the power, to fight to desperation. Now he felt that the future, and all therein, must depend upon himself; but the knowledge that he had only a few pence in his pocket, given secretly by Melanie, rather damped these valiant resolutions.

Ere long he found himself entering Woodstock, where the morning chimes, so pleasing and so mellow, were being rung from the modern tower

added to the old Chantry church, founded in some unwonted fit of fear or piety by the despicable King John.

Skirted on the west by the Glynne, which expands into a pretty sheet of water in Blenheim Park, the streets are handsome and regular; but, as the day was not a market one, they had all the stillness and desertion peculiar to those of a small country town. Few people were abroad, and—save, perhaps, the glove-makers—few seemed to have anything to do.

After lingering undecidedly under the piazzas of the town hall, which, when used, are adopted as a market-place, Dick bethought him of food, and turning into a quiet little tavern, named "The Checquers," which had a sanded tile floor and quaint windows of the low kind projecting outward, he asked for some bread and milk, which he proceeded at once to share fraternally with his faithful, four-footed companion, after making the latter perform some of the little tricks for which he was wont to reward him with biscuits and bones, heedless of the only visitor who occupied a corner of the

ample and wainscotted, but exceedingly shabby, coffee room.

"Now, Bingo!" cried Dick, holding out a morsel of bread, "earn this."

Bingo rose up, turned thrice round upon his hind feet, received the bread upon the tip of his impudent black nose, tossed it up to arrest its descent by a snap, deftly and with a laugh, for dogs do seem to laugh to those who study their eyes and faces.

A tall infantry sergeant, on recruiting service, as the tri-coloured ribbons streaming from his forage cap indicated, was having his "morning" or matutinal pick-me-up of brandy and soda, with a pipe, in the corner of the coffee room referred to, and was an observer of the performance; and as he applauded it greatly, Dick made Bingo go through several others, such as standing on his head, feigning death, and so forth.

He placed bread before the dog and said, "on trust"; whereupon Bingo remained still and without moving a muscle, till told it was "paid for," when he took it with a snap; and when sat upon a chair, with his fore-paws on the table, again

remained thus motionless, till Dick uttered the word "released," when he capered for joy and again stood on his head.

These talents and this discipline seemed greatly to impress the sergeant, who was a worthy-looking elderly non-commissioned officer of an age, character, and bearing seldom, if ever, seen in the service now, for he had been—it would appear—in the last China war, the medal for which was on his breast with others, for he had been lately scorched by the sun in Egypt, had borne his share in the midnight rush on Tel-el-Kebir, and more than one battle by the Nile. His closely shorn hair and thick moustache were thickly seamed with grey, but he had a pleasant face and a kindly manner.

After eyeing Dick closely for a time, he said "Where do you come from, my boy?"

"Stokencross," replied Dick.

"And where are you going to?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because—excuse me—but I could see with half an eye that you are on the tramp."

"Going to—well, I don't know," replied Dick, with a tone of sadness in his voice.

"Don't know, my little lad—that sounds badly. What is your name?"

"Dick—Richard Talbot."

"Ah—and what are your father and mother?"

"What do you mean?" asked Dick, irately. "What trade is it?"

"No—I think you're a cut above that," said the sergeant, with a little smile, while slapping his regimental pantaloons with his cane. "Well?" he added, enquiringly, with an eye to business.

"They are dead—both dead—long ago, sir," said Dick, with a sudden sob in his throat, for though he could barely recall their memory, he felt, somehow, very lonely and desolate just then. "My father was an officer, who served and died in India.

A subtle change came over the old sergeant's face as he heard the boy.

"Ah," said he, and he sipped the last of his grog, while, as Dick spoke, he looked wistfully at him, and there was in his heart that emotion which Sterne describes the son of poor Lieutenant

Lefevre feeling, when he first met Corporal Trim, and, in his loneliness, saw, in a soldier, "a friend."

"What was your father's regiment?" asked the sergeant, in a kindly tone.

"The 20th Bengal Infantry."

"Oh—the old 8th Punjaub," said the sergeant. "They were with us in the China war at Pekin, six-and-twenty years ago. By Jove! how time runs on! How many fine fellows I have seen three volleys fired over since then; how many more shovelled away without coffin or volley—buried where they fell—buried in unconsecrated ground, as the parsons say; though the hearts of many of these English lads would have consecrated Grand Cairo."

The sergeant seemed to say this to himself, with the nearest approach to a sigh, while mechanically refilling his briar-root.

"Poor lad!" said he, after a pause, as the sympathetic chord—the freemasonry of the Service—was struck; "why have you left home?"

"Because it wasn't much of a 'home'; I could not remain longer. My uncle—"

"Oh, d—n't! I had an uncle too. He turned me into the streets to find a living anyhow; so I took the Queen's bright shilling in the Fusiliers, and by the time I was your size was beating a drum under old Hope Grant at the storming of Pekin and the looting of the Summer Palace. You don't mean to go back, I suppose?"

"No!"

"That is right—but what do you mean to do?"

"Become a soldier if you will take me," said Dick, with a sudden glow in his boy's heart and a bright flush on his fair soft cheek.

"You are very young."

"I shall grow older."

"You are not an apprentice or anything of that kind, I hope?"

"No—I am just past fourteen."

"That will do—right as a trivet; we cannot enlist boys younger than that, by the Queen's regulations."

Dick felt himself "in for it" now, and rather enjoyed the new importance of the situation, though with the vaguest ideas in the world of what

was before him, or of the life on which he was about to enter.

He saw the mysterious letters T.R.W.F.R.L.W.O. on the shoulderstraps of the sergeant, according to the new arrangements of the vast territorial muddle, introduced into the unfortunate British Army by Cardwell and Co., in lieu of the old single battalions, with their "numbers," of historic memory.

The mystic interpretation of this Cabalo meant that the sergeant, Hawksley by name, belonged to "The Royal Western Fusilier Regiment, Lord Wolseley's Own," though Old Nick himself, or the sharpest War Office clerk might not have discovered the fact. This is no exaggeration. Under the same eccentric system, the old Second Foot have, on their appointments T.R.W.S.R.T.Q. (The Royal West Surrey Regiment—The Queen's !)

The sergeant ordered breakfast, and invited Dick, who, like a hungry boy, was nothing loth, to share it with him.

Sergeant Hawksley was a non-commissioned officer of the good old school, which seems to have passed away for ever with the old trained soldiers

who were ever the backbone and central figures of our service—that class of whom short service has proved the death-knell, and whose place the dirty, soured, and discontented reserve man can never fill.

The old sergeants taught the first rudiments of discipline to the recruit, whose future home was to be the regiment they were so proud of, and he was initiated by them into all the art of barrack and camp soldiery, with the mysteries of pipe-clay and packing a kit, while imbibing something of the veteran's religion—enthusiasm in the service, and pride in his corps, whatever that corps was, from the 1st Royal Scots to the 109th, and a veneration in whom he saw the ideal gentleman, foreseeing nothing of the time when his country might reward his life-long service with the usual shelter in the workhouse, and a share in a pauper grave, after thrilling the village boys by his yarns and

Shouldering his crutch to show how fields were won.

The mystic shilling is now, we believe, unnecessary; but Dick had duly received it, and was

told that after having passed the doctor, he would be taken before a justice of the peace for solemn attestation. And here we may inform the reader, with reference to Dick's tender age, that according to Her Majesty's Regulations (Section XIX.): "Boys of good character between the ages of 14 and 16 may be enlisted . . . . at the rate of one boy for every 200 rank and file of the establishment. . . . No boy, however, is to be enlisted who does not, from his make and stature, give fair promise of growth, and of becoming, when he has attained the proper age, an effective soldier."

To the practised eye of Sergeant Hawksley, Dick promised all the above required, and felt his position growing in importance, while already speculating on the martial appearance he should have, in the new unornamented tunic or slop jersey of his regiment, with the many cabalistic initials; but breakfast was barely over before he and Sergeant Hawksley had a rather unpleasant accession to their society.

This was the arrival of Corporal Gutters, the

sergeant's second in command, with some half-dozen or so more recruits, of whom he had been in charge over night at some cheap lodging-house in the slums of Woodstock.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE R.W.F. REGIMENT.

This accession of company filled Dick with some consternation and dismay. Unused, as yet, to any discipline, and undeterred by the presence or authority of Sergeant Hawksley, the recruits were noisy, and as rough and brutal in manner and language as any street Arabs could well be, and, like too much of the material that now swell our ranks, they were not from the agricultural districts, but from the recesses of London—that city of the slums—and in their dilapidated attire, like their general aspect, betokened an early struggle with work, crime, and misery.

Dick was instantly eyed over as a victim to fleece or torment in some fashion, but to sundry unmistakable hints, as to how glad they would

be "to drink his jolly good 'ealth," he could make no response.

However, some had a little money among them, and early though the hour, they proceeded, as they phrased it, "to liquor up, and have another wet," as they were nearly all the result of the public-house and street-corner system of recruiting —not of the good old and now forgotten system of "beating up" with drum and fife.

They perched their dirty persons on the tables as freely as they did on the ricketty chairs, with pots of indifferent beer, adulterated stout, or glasses of "dog's nose" before them, with foul clay pipes stuck between their teeth, smoking industriously thereat and still more fouling the atmosphere with the odour of coarse tobacco; some singing, some swearing, and all disposed to chaff each other in rough and unsavoury terms —so we must hasten over this portion of our story.

Whether Corporal Gutters — baptised Albert Edward, for the snobs of humble life imitate those of the higher circle in the love of grand

names—also, of her Majesty's T.R.W.F.L.W.O. Regiment, was a non-commissioned officer of the new school, we do not pretend to say, but only know, that though barely twenty and past the pacing-stick, he was a finished scamp and tyrant, who, after being wanted by the police under several aliases in his native Whitechapel, had joined the corps as a "lardwell recruit."

Cadaverous in visage, he was sandy-haired, and like an old boy or premature man. His upper lip, though of great length, was, like his acutely receding chin, hairless, and would probably ever be so. His cunning eyes were of a watery grey, swollen and protruding like those of a pug dog, which he strongly resembled. He had neither been well developed nor well nourished, and his ill-shapen legs were thickest at the ankles, and for a time past he had been fleecing the "Johnnie Raws" by the "Three-Card Trick," in which he excelled, with other London street accomplishments.

He speedily fastened on Dick.

"Who's precious cur is this?" he asked, snatching up Bingo—who, scared by the general

noise and row, had kept close under his master's chair—by the nape of the neck, and swinging the poor animal about in a way the latter seemed well disposed to resist with his teeth.

"Put down the dog, you fellow!" cried Dick, filled with wrath and alarm.

"Fellow! Who do you call that, you d——d young wasp? Your cur, is it?" said the corporal, laughing, though insolent and irate. "It is clean agin the Queen's rools and reggulations for recruits to have dawgs, and I'll toss this 'un into the Glynne with a stone at its neck."

"'Taint 'arf a bad 'un," interposed another warrior of the Whitechapel type; "he's worth a fiver at least. Suppose, lads, we get a fiver on this 'ere dawg, and has some jolly drinks all round?"

This proposal was greeted with a storm of applause and much clanking of battered pots upon the sloppy tables.

"All right," said the stripling corporal. "I knows a party at the Marlboro' Arms as will give us the money."

Swelling with rage and alarm, Dick, who had started to his feet on this, said:

"Set down my dog, you insolent rascal."

"He's mad—he is," said the corporal, appealingly, to his companions. "Does you know who you're a-speakin' to?" he asked of Dick, while his grasp on the terrier tightened.

"Do you know who you are speaking to?" said Dick.

"Blest if I do, or care."

"Well, I am a gentleman."

This assertion was greeted, after the silence of a moment or two, with a roar of laughter that was certainly genuine, and much doffing in mockery of battered half-bullet hats; but this only added to the exasperation of Dick, who, before Sergeant Hawksley could interfere, started forward and confronted the dog-stealer, for such he considered him, amid cries of—

"Here's a rum go!"

"A gent—a gent—oh what a lark!"

And much more to the same purpose.

"Stand back, you d——d young muff," said the

corporal, "or I'll knock your two sanguinary eyes into one!"

"Two may play at that game," cried Dick, who was a fearless little gentleman, and clenching his fists in a way that Reggie had taught him, he rushed on Gutters and dealt him in quick succession a couple of blows that, while nearly knocking him down, compelled him to release the dog and stand on his own defence.

"This is a hout and hout mutiny," he cried, with a fierce and filthy oath, and was rushing on Dick, who must eventually have had the worst of the brawl, when the strong hand of the sergeant arrested him. "Let me go," cried Gutters, choking with rage; "I'll—I'll murder the young willan!"

"No you won't—he may hand you over to the police for dog stealing, and it won't be the first time, perhaps—silence; I order you to be quiet," said the sergeant, sternly, and the bully fell back abashed.

But Dick had received several side-blows from others who resented, perhaps, the respectability of his appearance, and more than all, the inoppor-

tune assertion that he was a "gentleman." He felt his lips bleeding, and sought a pocket for his handkerchief; but it was gone—one of his new English comrades, true to his old instincts, had quietly appropriated it in the scuffle.

Sergeant Hawksley thought the best way to keep the peace, for the present, would be to take Dick away with him, and have a ramble together in the town prior to taking him before a magistrate for attestation; and for fear of another attack upon his favourite, the poor boy carried Bingo in his arms for a time, and was rewarded by having his cheeks elaborately licked therefor.

"Gutters will be your enemy for all this," said the sergeant. "He is a bad lot—will smash you up if he can. I would rather have lost twenty guineas than have had this row happen."

"But I will not associate with him," said Dick, loftily.

The sergeant smiled, and then cast a hostile glance at the terrier, though the innocent cause of the disturbance.

The worthy veteran then, after giving Dick a

glass of beer at the Bear Inn as they rambled about, proceeded to give him a deal of sound advice, concerning how he should comport himself among such fellows as Gutters—"the fellows of the new system"—after he joined the regiment, otherwise, he would find life a pandemonium on earth.

He also instructed him in all that he was to reply to the magistrate—the many preliminaries, as to his name, age, height, width of chest, birthplace, parents, and so forth; and that he was to state his perfect willingness to serve in the R.W.F.L.W.O. Regiment for the term of six years with the colours; to be followed, at the end of that period, with a similar term in the Army Reserve on threepence per diem for the luxuries of life.

To all of this Dick listened with ideas that were vague indeed; he could not anticipate the future. To a boy of his age, twelve years more seemed a lifetime; but his spirits rose again in the bright sunshine, and under the kindly influence of the sergeant, whom he deemed a protector and hero, with his China and Egyptian medals.

There was sure to be a big war before long—one of "the big wars that make ambition virtue" —thought Dick, and if he only fought like some of the youthful heroes of whom he had read so much lately, the British Government must, in common gratitude, make him a general at least, and what would Uncle Grimshaw think then?

Of this future, Dick felt just then as sure as ever Sancho did of his island.

In this mood he indited at the Bear his letter to Melanie, and gave it to the sergeant to stamp and post for him; and as the former was in no hurry to do this, because of subsequent events, a long time elapsed before she received it.

After the preliminary of passing the doctor, Dick found himself with the sergeant under the piazzas of the town hall, where he regaled himself, for the first time in his life, perhaps, with a cheap cigar, supplied to him by Hawksley, prior to presenting themselves before the sitting magistrate, who, they were informed, was very busy just then with some poaching cases, which

had made his worship very savage, as he was a great game preserver.

So Dick assumed an air of nonchalance, and sauntered to and fro with the dog close to his heels, smoking his new cigar with doubtful pleasure, and from which, ere long, he began to feel unfortunate effects.

The market-place and all the houses seemed to career after each other like the wooden horses in a merry-go-round. Dick felt most decidedly sick, though ashamed to say so; and a head-ache came upon him, as though his temples were split open.

He threw away the fatal cigar; but did so too late, and a wild clutch that he made at Bingo rendered matters worse. The mischief was done. He heard the voice of the sergeant saying:

"Now is the time, young sir. Come along."

And mechanically Dick followed him—followed him into a spacious room with lofty but plainly-glazed windows, furnished with rows of seats on three sides like pews in a church, with a raised

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dais or platform on the fourth, in the centre of which, under a gilded coat of the Royal Arms, sat a solitary magistrate with an air of grotesque dignity, with a couple of helmetted constables near him and an old and white-haired clerk at a desk in front.

"For what is this boy brought here?" asked the magistrate.

"Attestation, sir," replied the sergeant.

"Look up, boy!" said the former, in a voice which, if awful, sounded strangely familiar to Dick, who, to his consternation and disgust—even amid his sickness and dire confusion—found himself face to face with Plantagenet Pugwash, Esquire, Justice of the Peace for the County of Oxford, swelling on his perch, in all the dignity of his vast stick-up collar, scarlet tie, and brown surtout, and, in short, surrounded by all the terrors of country civil despotism — the last man in the world before whom Dick Talbot, under all the circumstances, could wish to find himself.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

DICK'S SCRAPE.

Now, Mr. P. Pugwash was an Englishman of a not uncommon kind; and it was easier to appeal to his ignorant prejudices and to his passions than to his reason. Thus, after a grim and triumphant stare of recognition, he began, as a magistrate, his questions—per printed form—but in a bullying and tyrannical manner, sufficiently galling to a boy of spirit like Dick, who, however, heard him as one in a dream, and his voice failed him, while the four corners of the justice-room seemed to be in quick pursuit of each other.

"Speak out, sir!" thundered old Pugwash.

"The boy does not seem quite well, sir," suggested the sergeant.

"The boy's either intoxicated or shamming," snarled Mr. Pugwash, twitching up his long shirt collar.

"Shamming—not a bit of it, your worship; the poor boy is only sick—"

"Don't dictate to me, sir! I says as he is intoxicated. I did not think—I do not think that anyone but this hardened young rascal would have the effrontery to appear before me—before me—in such a state as he is!"

"I'll bring him again to-morrow, sir—he'll be all right then, sir," said the sergeant, kindly, "the lad isn't used to smoking, certainly—"

"But he drinks—he has a brother, a shabby sailor feller, and we know that all sailors, and soldiers too, drink."

"So do many that consider themselves better, yet ain't worth powder and shot," said the soldier indignantly.

"I don't want your opinion, sergeant—silence, sir! Wigorous measures is necessary here—I must windicate the lawr of the land."

"Just so, sir," said Sergeant Hawksley,

who thought with Mr. Bumble, that "the law was a Hass."

"The prisoner is remanded in custody till to-morrow," said Mr. P. Pugwash with a great air; "he must be attested not later than twenty-four hours after enlistment—don't the hact say so, clerk?"

"Yes, your worship, unless the smart money be paid," replied the seedy old clerk, who was certainly one of an antiquated school, as he added in a snivelling voice, "otherwise both parties is criminally implicated—one for deserting, and 'tother for aiding, abetting, and conniving at desertion."

"Conniving at desertion—hexactly so," said Mr. Pugwash, who was densely ignorant of the whole matter. "Remanded till to-morrow morning. Call the next case."

"Remanded till to-morrow morning—and in custody," wrote the clerk.

"Custody, of course," snapped Mr. Pugwash.

Then Dick found himself transferred from his friend, the sergeant, to the care of an unpleasantly

stolid-looking policeman of apparently colossal proportions—a circumstance which dissipated the fumes of his recent cigar at once.

"After this you must keep your eye on him, sergeant," said Mr. Pugwash, viciously, as a Parthian shot; "he is a precious young wiper and a poaching waggabone."

"You're a ——" began Dick, furiously.

"Silence, Talbot," cried the sergeant, and he was pulled away.

"And look here, constable," said the magistrate, "you had better have that dawg of his drowned or destroyed; it is a wicious cur."

"All right, your worship," was the response, while Dick, clutching Bingo tightly and despairingly, was lugged rather roughly away.

Now it chanced that in the constable Sergeant Hawksley suddenly discovered an old comrade, with whom he immediately fraternised, and to whose kindly care he specially commended Dick, for the worthy non-commissioned officer was really interested in the homeless but spirited lad who seemed to have no friend but his

dog, and was honestly concerned for the mistake of which he knew himself to be the innocent cause.

Thus he told Dick to "keep up his pecker till to-morrow," when he should see him again; meanwhile, with some forethought, he made arrangements about food for him, and went away, after which poor Dick, feeling very lonely and miserable, was confined in a small apartment—a kind of cell, with a wooden bed and couple of blankets as furniture, nothing more—wherein to pass the entire day and following night as best he could; his only solace amid his new affliction being that his dog was left with him, at least till the time expired.

Committed to his own reflections now, they took a very darkened, bitter turn indeed, as the silent and lonely hours of the day passed slowly—oh, how slowly!—on.

In his solitude he thought much over the whole situation in which he found himself. His military ardour was considerably cooled, if not crushed; his natural pride and sensitiveness had received more than one most serious shock.

In the Western Fusiliers he would not, and could not, associate with such repulsive fellows as Corporal Gutters and his companions; thus he resolved if he could to avoid it; that gallant corps should not be favoured with his services therein, nor would he undergo the fatal ceremony of attestation therefor.

He remembered to have heard Montague Lonsdale say, that at this very period many good fellows who had failed to commit the barbarisms of Chaucer to heart, and the most obscure passages of Shakespeare to memory for Exams, and had failed to get suitable employment of any kind after years wasted in useless study, had enlisted; and that in one Hussar regiment there was an entire troop of Public School and University men, who had pluckily become troopers as their only opening in life; while in the ranks of the famous Black Watch alone, there were no less than forty Scottish gentlemen serving as privates; so all corps, thought Dick, could not be like H.M. Fusiliers, with all the mystical letters.

Anyhow, he should "levant."

He would turn a clean pair of heels to the whole matter if possible, and just as the sun was setting and darkness closing, he set about an examination of the place in which he found himself, aided and inspired by all that he had read in his tales of boys' adventures by flood and field, and their hair-breadth escapes from savages, pirates, man-eating tigers, and demons too.

The narrow closet or cell—if such it was—opened, he knew, off a corridor adjoining the office or apartment occupied by the Inspector and his constables, whose voices and heavy footsteps, muffled by distance and closed doors, he could hear from time to time.

Its ceiling was lofty, and it had a small window somewhat high in the external wall, but above his hermit-like couch, and thereby not inaccessible to one who could climb deftly as a squirrel, like Dick.

With boy-like agility he scrambled up, and through the dirt-obscured panes saw that it was only about thrice his own height from the ground

without, and overlooked a kind of meadow, beyond which spread the open country; while in the immediate foreground were some leafless trees and hedgerows, already becoming shrouded in the rising, silvery haze of evening.

He found also that the window was ungrated, but secured by a screw, stiffened by rust, through upper and lower sashes; thus his place of sequestration was certainly not one for prisoners of a desperate class. Both sashes, if open, would make an aperture so small that no fully-grown man of moderate size could have escaped thereby; but Dick was a boy—young, supple, and slender—and boys can achieve feats of agility in which a grenadier would fail. So his spirits rose, and could he but get the window, or even the lower half thereof, open without noise or exciting an alarm, he resolved that his place in Woodstock should be vacant in the morning.

This desire was enhanced by a certainty that once or twice he heard the voice of Corporal Gutters in the constables' room.

The darkness fell completely, and Bingo whined

and crept close to him for companionship and warmth. "Faith in a beloved superior is perhaps the most beautiful and affecting of all the attributes of a dog," says a writer; and certainly the little terrier had the most sublime faith in Dick.

The latter could not bring himself to recline on, or even use in any way, the blanket assigned for his use. He was sharp enough to imagine, with great disgust, what manner of inmate might have used it last; and now, boy like, his spirit rose higher as the time for action came nearer.

But if his fingers proved unable to turn the old screw and open the window, or if Bingo barked at the attempt and raised an alarm—what then?

Dick shrewdly expected that a final visit would be paid him about or after nightfall. Then he would be left completely to himself, and have about fourteen hours of darkness and gloom in which to make the attempt to escape from his prison with all its abundant humiliations, and put as much distance between it and himself as possible.

For the first time, perhaps, the degrading sensation of being a prisoner came over the boy,

when, amid the darkness, he heard heavy steps in the corridor without—a key grating in the door-lock, and saw a light stream like the long blade of a fiery sword through the keyhole, as the door was opened, and the colossal constable, in his glazed night-cape, peeped in, muttered, "all right, I see,"—and again left him to darkness and solitude.

"Now!" thought Dick, as he drew a long breath, he would be *solus* now till morning, and ere then he must have succeeded, or miserably failed.

For a time he sat still, and seemed to hear only the pulsations of his heart. Alone—he was again alone! and thought and felt it to be a great adventure, to baffle the insolent and pitiful Pugwash, to escape from the Western Fusiliers and all connected therewith, and also to put the law and its big myrmidons at defiance.

There was no moon, but the stars shone clearly through the small window overhead. All was very silent without—so still that Dick could hear once or twice the clamour of a long string of aquatic birds winging their way to the fenny and marshy lands on the banks of the Glynne and Isis.

He clambered up to the window, and with bated breath again looked through its cobwebby panes. Darkness lay everywhere; scarcely a light twinkled on that side of the town, and a great stillness, we have said, prevailed. He tried the screw, clutching the knob with trembling fingers, and his heart seemed to die away on finding that it was immovable—fast as tight turning and old rust could make it.

Perspiration burst upon his temples, and the exultant visage of old Pugwash, wedged between his stiff collars, came in fancy before him. What was he to do? To smash the glasses would not avail him and might only cause an alarm, and he had been deprived of his pocket-knife, with which he might have cut round the bolt.

Again he tried it, with all his strength and a prayer on his lips.

It yielded—it moved at last! Exultantly, breathlessly, slowly, he turned it round, till it came forth and fell on the plank bed below. Then Dick found that both sashes moved horizontally on pivots; he pushed open the lower one and felt the

chill air of the last night of November on his flushed and heated face.

He peered forth. Around him all was still, lonely, and silent, save the bark of a distant dog and the clock in the old Chantry church tower striking the hour of eleven.

The ground below looked far down—he could not see it in the haze and obscurity, but judged correctly that it gave a drop of about fifteen feet.

What if in dropping he broke a leg? Well —happen what might, the attempt must be made now, though if Bingo barked in exultation on being brought forth, all might be lost yet.

To muffle and break the fall of himself and his dog, he threw out the blankets, letting them drop in a heap pretty close to the wall. Then he put the terrier on the window-sill, and passing out feet foremost, let himself down to his full length by one arm and hand, clutching Bingo by the other, and dropped deftly as a cat on the ground below—the concussion being alike broken by the blankets and the soft wet turf on which they lay.

Dick lighted on his feet, but fell prone on his

back, and though shaken, was only breathless for a half-minute; but not a bit the worse for the adventure, and still grasping his dog to prevent it from barking, he began his flight without the delay of a second.

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE WANDERER.

Crossing the open space, which he knew to be a field, he vaulted over a low boundary wall, followed closely by his dog, now barking wildly and joyously with a full sense of freedom, and found himself in a roadway which led off right and left—he knew not to where, nor cared, so that in either direction he got away from his present perilous locality.

Chancing it, he hurried on a little to the left, and then, with a caution beyond his years, paused and listened intently to learn whether his escape had been discovered or if he was followed. Not a sound—not a footfall broke the silence that reigned around him. He looked sharply about also, but no one was to be seen ; so Dick trod on, or ran rather, until he became breathless.

The whole of the past few hours seemed a kind

of nightmare to Dick—a nightmare with only one sympathetic figure in it, that of the kindly sergeant, who he hoped might not get into a scrape through his disappearance, as Dick's ideas of military law were very cloudy; but he felt high exultation at the idea of baffling Mr. Pugwash, and also of eluding for ever Corporal Gutters, whose visits to the constable's room he never doubted had direct reference to getting Bingo into his hands, for sale or some other nefarious purpose.

Such a story of his adventures he would have to tell Melanie and Reggie.

But when should he see either again? Tears started to his eyes at this reflection; he would not return to his uncle's house, perhaps to find there a warrant for his arrest, issued by the tyrannical Pugwash—for Dick had a shrewd, but unpleasant suspicion that by his flight, after taking the enigmatical shilling of which he had heard so much, he was somewhat of a deserter.

Anyway, he would return that coin, or the value thereof, to Sergeant Hawksley, if he could; and then, he thought, the compact would be ended.

Past houses and homes, the windows of which were closed and dark, and the inmates of which were sunk in sleep, Dick walked on—he knew not whither. He felt cold—miserably so—and all the more when the hours approached morning. He knew not how many miles he had traversed, and supposed they must be many; yet he had not placed a very great distance between himself and Woodstock after all, as it eventually proved, for after passing a mile or so beyond Charlbury, a little market town, he got into a network of lonely lanes, that led him partially back in the direction he had come from. High in the sky rode the Queen of Night, "wading," as Scott describes it, through fleecy clouds, peering down apparently at the lonely wayfarer, between the bare, black hedge-rows of the deep old English lanes, and flooding all the long white fields and quaint little paddocks with silver.

He discovered an empty cattle-shed in the sheltered corner of a paddock, and crept therein for warmth and to escape the biting wind, which had now become keen and frosty, to add to his

misery and enhance the conviction that all the romance, of which he once had fancied himself the hero, had evaporated.

No brilliant or racy adventure had come to Dick, which, after all he had read of the wild peril and daring faced by youthful heroes, was rather disgusting to a boy of pluck and spirit; and his teeth chattered as he sunk among a quantity of dry straw in a corner, and being well nigh worn out, dropped into an uneasy slumber.

When he awoke, the sun was shining brightly in a blue and unclouded sky, and a frosty rime covered all the landscape. There had been a slight fall of snow in the night, and amid it the little footprints of the robin, and the deeper indentments of the long-eared hare, were visible to the practised eye of Dick as he came forth, shivering and reluctantly, without wrapper or overcoat, and betook him again to the highway, that was to lead him he knew not where.

To cultivate a little warmth, he attempted to run; but his steps were staggering and uncertain now. Anon he passed a little pond by the wayside.

It was overshadowed by some pollard willows—those hideous features in the Dutch and English landscape—but upon it was a group of children belonging to an adjacent farm, sliding to and fro, happy, joyous, full of frolic and life, with noise, laughter, and apple-red cheeks; and pausing for a minute or two, Dick watched them wistfully, enviously.

Suddenly there was a mingled yell of terror—the ice, which was slight and thin, cracked from end to end. A little girl fell in, and the rest fled with cries of terror and dismay, leaving her to her fate.

Amid the broken ice, the child rose and sank again while the shrieks of a woman were heard:

"Oh, my child—my poor child—she is under the ice now, and I—I cannot swim!"

"But I can," cried Dick; "and I'll save her too!"

Without the hesitation of a moment, he went headlong into the chasm—for the pond was deep—and the woman continued to shriek and shudder and wring her hands as she saw Dick struggling amid the broken ice and whirling water, grasp, once, twice, and thrice, a dark object below the

surface, and then rise with his face cut by a sharp fragment; but after a third attempt he got the little girl to land, and placed her, voiceless and all but senseless with cold and terror, in the arms of her mother, who, in the mental agony of the moment, forgot to give the preserver a word of thanks, but rolled her apron round the dripping rescued child and bore her off towards the house.

Drenched, the icy water pouring from his clothes, more cold and more miserable than ever, chilled to the very marrow of his bones, the unfortunate Dick Talbot looked wistfully, helplessly, and hopelessly after her.

He was about to follow, and in the humility that was born of loneliness and misery to seek for food and warmth at the ruddy fire, the steady radiance of which he saw streaming from a mullioned window on the frosty atmosphere and the bleak waste of wintry fields, when his eye caught the sight of something red upon the adjacent highway.

Whether it was the coat of a soldier or aught else, Dick never thought of waiting to see; but

thinking only of pursuit and re-capture, he glanced wildly about him for a place of concealment.

Near the pond was a barn, above which was evidently a spacious loft, to which a ladder gave access. Staggering like a drunken man, he scrambled up the ladder, cast it down after doing so, and found himself in a dry and cosy place that was piled nearly to the roof with straw, fodder for the cattle below; and there, after wringing, as best he could, the water from his coat and trousers, he burrowed, as he had done on the first night of his flight, for warmth; and then a faintness came over him, the result of all he had undergone—anxiety, weariness, dread, and lack of that sufficient repose so necessary for the young; but now sleep—the sole luxury of the poor and the toil-worn—induced by comparative comfort, came upon Dick, and his dog crept close beside him.

He must have lain thus for some hours.

When full consciousness returned, he knew not what the time was, whether midnight or the early winter morning; but the short day had evidently passed, and complete darkness set in.

He knew perfectly where he was, but lay still, feeling, the while, every limb stiff and sore; and it was something like a miracle that fever did not attack him. He was about to doze off again when he was roused by the vehement yelping of Bingo, whom he found affectionately licking his hands and face; and then the more furious barking of the dog thoroughly aroused him.

A red hazy light flashed along the loft in which he lay, showing the bare and cobwebby rafters above, the piled straw below, and a couple of men making their way towards him, one armed with a double-barrelled gun and the other with a pitchfork. The first, by his costume, appeared to be a farmer, in shooting coat, ample waistcoat, and long gaiters, fat, cosy, and well-to-do looking; the other, a shock-headed yokel in knee-breeches, hob-nailed shoes, and the inevitable smock frock, which, as it is the attire of the Norman peasants, probably came into England with her conquerors.

"Come, tumble up!" cried the farmer, angrily. "How many more of you are there among that straw?"

A great alarm fell upon Dick, and all his spirit had departed now. Tears started to his eyes again, as he thought of Melanie and his poor lame brother, both so loving and tender.

"Yes," he muttered; "I shall be murdered now, I suppose, and no one will hear of it—how or where."

"Tumble up and toddle out, I say!" cried the farmer again, striking the butt end of his gun on the floor. "You are one of those rascally tramps that steal my hens and set my barns a-fire by smoking among the hay and straw. Off with you all, or I shall summon the police!"

"All?—I am here alone, sir," said Dick, staggering up with difficulty, and half-blinded by the glare of the lantern held before his eyes.

"There ain't no more than this boy, Mr. Mopps," said the yokel, after peering about and prodding the straw with his pitchfork.

"Where do you come from—who are your friends, you young warmint?"

"Oh, sir," said Dick, now almost incapable of

standing, "do be kind, please, I have neither father nor mother nor home."

This broke down the indignation of the farmer, who of late had suffered much from the depredations of "tramps," as he called them, who had robbed his hen-roosts, and fired his hayricks more than once by the reckless use of lighted matches; but he was a kind-hearted man and saw that the boy, if pale, sorely fagged, and "seedy" in aspect, was a handsome one, with crisp golden hair, and honest, fearless blue eyes."

"Come down from this place and let us have a look at you," said he, loth to become too pitiful suddenly; and Dick followed him from the loft, down the ladder, into the keen air of the winter evening, where he fell in a heap, half-lifeless on the ground.

"Wife! wife! look here!" cried Farmer Mopps, in great dismay, as he carried Dick into the kitchen and set him in a chair near the fire.

"Oh, mammy," cried a little girl, peeping fearfully at him, "this is the boy—the boy who pulled me out of the water!"

"And who ran away before I could thank him," exclaimed the farmer's wife." So he is, John—the same boy—poor child, he looks like death."

"Dang it," cried the farmer, "is this the case? Was it you that saved my little lass from the duck-pond?"

But Dick was past responding; he could only gasp an assent, while the smaller children gathered round him in fear and wonder; but the unwonted warmth brought back circulation, life, and energy to Dick quickly now, amid the many comforts of the spacious farm kitchen.

Long before the present time the farm-house had been a manor, and hence was huge, rambling, straggling, and very quaint, but very comfortable. There were spacious old wainscotted parlours, where many a glass of old port had been drunk to "the king over the water, and the confusion of all Hanover rats," and where the squires of the past had hung their swords, their whips, and hunting gear; but were now used as storage rooms for bacon and apples, potatoes and lumber.

The family of Farmer Mopps, it would appear,

were just about to sup, when Bingo's barking had sounded an alarm and drawn attention to the supposed tramp in the straw-loft.

A fire blazed up the spacious chimney, which was lined by old blue Delft tiles; the red brick floor was closely swept and slightly sanded, yet not a footstep had marred its perfect cleanness and neatness; a snow-white cloth covered the heavy oaken table, and thereon were tea and hot cakes for the children, cold beef, pie, and a tankard of brown October for the farmer. So ere long Dick found himself in clover, thoroughly renovated, and in the eyes of the old couple the little hero of the house, as the saver of their eldest daughter from the depths of the duck-pond.

On being questioned about himself, he became unusually reserved for his years, and passing over his military aspirations and the episode connected therewith, he only stated that he had run away from home in consequence of ill-treatment; and received the unpalatable advice that it was his duty to return to that home at once, wherever it was.

Burly Farmer Mopps was full of fun and jollity, and sung merrily to his youngest child, who crowed upon his knee. Among other ditties was one which was painted on his huge ale tankard, a vessel more than a hundred years old; and he carolled it out with great gusto :—

Let the wealthy and great
Roll in splendour and state,
I envy them not, I declare it;
I own my own lamb,
My chickens and ham,
I shear my own fleece and I wear it.

I have lawns, I have bowers,
I have fruits and sweet flowers,
And the lark is my morning alarmer;
So sing, jolly boys, now,
"Here's God bless the plough,
With long life and good luck to the farmer."

Meanwhile, Dick's four-footed companion crouched by the genial fire—he had not seen one for some time past—and the children assiduously stuffed him with cake and scraps of meat.

"A good dog!" said the farmer, approvingly. "I had just such a terrier once—a Scotch one he

was—and he went up a drain after a rat till he got wedged in somehow, and had to be dug out by the shovel. Four men were two hours at it; and he was never a hair the worse."

Betimes the household of Farmer Mopps, whose sister-in-law was housekeeper at Ravensbourne Hall, were all abed. A comfortable sleeping-place was assigned to Dick, whom the farmer, after a conference with his wife and with her earnest concurrence, resolved to take to his friends on the morrow, whether he desired it or not; but others, whose influence was unthought of then, were fated to come into the affairs of the young wanderer, for the early breakfast had scarcely been partaken of next day when, to the consternation of all, there appeared in the farm kitchen the smock-frocked yokel, accompanied by Corporal Gutters of the R.W.F.L.W.O. Regiment, and a rural constable.

The two former had met at a roadside tavern; and the corporal, on hearing the boor detailing, with much exaggeration and horse-laughter, the episode of the discovery in the loft, and that there

was a boy and a dog in the case, never doubted who the wanderer was, and inspired by the hope of a reward, had followed the trail at once.

"My eye!" he exclaimed on seeing Dick; "you do look like a ghost down on its luck."

"Now, what may you want, my man?" asked Farmer Mopps, pausing with tankard in hand.

"Only that 'ere young cove," replied the corporal, eyeing with malice and triumph the shrinking Dick.

"Why—and for what?"

"Punishment! He has bolted — mizzled — deserted the Queen's service, that is all."

"A deserter — this child!" exclaimed the farmer's buxom wife, starting up.

"Precisely. Child—he's one of the devil's own kind, that's wot he is; and he must come along with us—double quick too!" he added, with a glance of appeal to the tall stolid-visaged constable.

All the children now shrieked and yelled, believing that Dick, and his dog too, were to be done to death, as deserters.

"Lookee here," said the bluff farmer. "I want none of your larks, my young fellow. This is all stuff; or if a little money—"

"Money won't do nothing!" said the stripling corporal, adopting a bullying tone; "he must go into the custody of this 'ere constable till we gets a suitable hescort to 'eadquarters."

"And what may the penalty be for a boy like this giving you the slip?"

"Hanging, maybe; and too good for him," said the corporal with a grin, while the cries of the children were heard again, to his great delight.

"I want none of your chaff, you young cad!" said the farmer, assuming his hat and ample great-coat. "Where is the boy to go?" he asked, turning to the constable.

"Back to Woodstock, sir. It must be as the corporal says it."

Dick's heart sank. He thought of Mr. Plantagenet Pugwash, and Pugwash only.

"John," cried the farmer's wife, "have the horse put to the dog-cart, go back with the boy

to the town, and see an end of this folly—for folly it must be," she added, with a hostile glance at Gutters.

So in ten minutes more Dick found himself, like one in a dream, but comfortably tucked up in a warm rug, being bowled back through the keen frosty air to Woodstock, with Bingo between his knees and the corporal and constable seated behind him—a proximity to the civil power by no means to the taste of the Whitechapel warrior. Farmer Mopps drove rapidly, and Dick soon saw the tower of the old Chantry church, and heard its pretty peal of bells—saw again the streets, the town hall with its piazza, and the place from which he had effected his escape, as it seemed now, in vain.

Now Dick had heard of terrible things being done to deserters—and he was one! He might be shot perhaps—blown from a gun. What had he not read of in the tales of war and terror published for the behoof of boys?

He had seen an engraving—who has not seen it?—of a deserter who declined to have his eyes

blind-folded, on one knee before a dreadful platoon of musketry, with his dog rearing against him, to be shot also—just as Bingo would do in that supreme moment; and Dick almost wept as he thought of his own demise in this fashion, before a squad of the R.W.F.L.W.O. commanded by the inexorable Corporal Gutters.

But few things in this world happen exactly in the way we expect them to do.

The farmer asked to see a justice of the peace. He was told that one was sitting in court now—Pugwash, as Dick's "prophetic soul" feared—and he was lugged, rather than conducted, by the corporal into the justice room again, and lifting up his eyes to the dreaded Bench, he saw, not the grotesque and plebian-looking soapboiler, in the central chair thereof, but the gentlemanly presence, suave and pleasant face of Sir Brisco Braybrooke, with his bushy eyebrows and snow-white moustache.

"Dick!" he exclaimed; "Dick Talbot—what the deuce is this? Where is the charge-sheet—what is the matter? Where have you

been hiding yourself all this time, you young rogue?"

For days and nights Dick had never had his clothes off, and their sodden aspect gave him a rather deplorable look just then.

His story was soon told.

"Leave the matter to me," said the baronet. "Corporal, you may go; but send here Sergeant Hawksley. I shall arrange all this."

And so it was duly arranged by the influence, advice, and money of Sir Brisco; and instead of being handed over, as he feared, to the tender mercies of Corporal Albert Edward Gutters, Dick found himself being driven homeward that evening in the well-hung carriage of the friendly baronet, who laughed heartily at all his adventures and the present end of his visions of military glory.

Great was the joy of Melanie at the sudden restoration of the wanderer, her "lost boy," as she called him; but this new debt of gratitude to Sir Brisco Braybrooke was a source of perplexity to her, lessened, however, just then, by the fortunate absence of her uncle, who would have made it a

reason for indulging in his usual taunts, advice, and the urgence of his matrimonial views and wishes.

"You shall be a soldier yet, Dick, if you choose; I will send you to Sandhurst as a cadet," were the parting words of Sir Brisco.

CHAPTER L.

MARRIAGE BELLS.

The preparations for Amy Brendon's marriage had meanwhile gone on apace. All was getting fast ready now; and her Hussar, Horace Musgrave, looking handsome and more like a Hussar than ever, even after his woeful "smash up" in the hurdle race, had come to Stokencross, accompanied by his groomsman, one of the Prince's Own—with a bracelet for the bride; one of the most beautiful Bond Street could furnish—and taken up his quarters with his kinsman at Ravensbourne Hall. There, too, had come the bright Hilda Tremayne, with her—it is difficult to say—choice (she had smiled on so many), whose initials had caused such dismay to Amy in the past time.

So the wedding-day came at last; a bright and clear day, early in December. The whole village

of Stokencross was astir betimes; and coloured mottoes, garlands of false flowers and bright streamers gave a picturesque appearance to the little street overlooked by the ancient church on its green knoll.

Amy had but two attendants, Melanie and Miss Aurora Pugwash, judiciously invited to be a bridesmaid by Mr. Brendon as the daughter of a very wealthy parishioner, whose wedding gift far, far eclipsed the poor offering of Melanie. But the next marriage at which the latter officiated, she hoped, would be her own.

Her own!

How little could she then foresee, when, where, and how she was to figure as a bride.

The floral wealth of Sir Brisco's conservatories had been lavished on the decoration of the old village church, as his pineries and vineries had made the elegance and luxury of the bridal breakfast.

Dick Talbot—marriages were of small importance to him, save in so far as a huge piece of the cake was concerned—had gone for a ramble in the woods; and his brother Reginald was alone—

alone with all his own sad thoughts after a sleepless and weary night, for being incapable of all exercise, repose came to him fitfully and in snatches; and on this morning, in one of these, he had dreamt of Amy Brendon.

He heard her voice talking to him kindly and pitifully, though he knew not the words she used.

He touched her thick dark hair with his thin, wasted fingers, and played with the *piquante* fringe that curled nearly to her bright and laughing eyes; and ere her face began to fade away, he felt—yes, actually seemed to feel—the touch of her lips, in a farewell kiss, softly and glowingly upon his own; and he awoke with a start and a half-stifled cry, to find it was her wedding morning.

And now, with the memory of that vivid and tantalising dream keenly in his mind, he sat near the open window, heedless of the frosty air, reclining on his couch in his usual helplessness, and listening for the passing sounds that came from the distant village.

He reviewed his past life since he had known her, especially since he had come home, a helpless

cripple, from the coast of Egypt, doomed to beggary by the very Government for which he had lost health and hope. He thought over the time when he had rejoiced in her society and in the light her beauty and her grave and winning manner shed around him, till the blow struck his heart, when Musgrave came and he knew that she was engaged—was to be married.

How he felt none knew save himself. Better, he thought, to have been struck blind—yea, stone dead. He would have avoided her, after that news came—avoided her society and escaped the world; but he was helpless as a child.

All the love of his heart had gone forth to her, allured by her winning ways, her sisterly bearing to him—for Amy never meant or imagined it could be more. It was a perfect love, as he neither hoped nor looked for any return. Her presence to him had been as sunshine cast about the gloom of his existence; and in his silent worship he would cheerfully have laid down his life for Amy, if by doing so he could have served her.

His emotions were expressed in the words of Shelley's serenade, as he had often heard her sing it :—

I arise from dreams of thee
In the first sweet sleep of night,
When the winds are breathing low
And the stars are shining bright.
I arise from dreams of thee,
And a spirit in my feet
Has led me—who knows how?—
To thy chamber window, sweet.

O lift me from the grass!
I die—I faint—I fail!
Let thy love in kisses rain
On my lips and eyelids pale.
My cheek is cold and white, alas!
My heart beats loud and fast,
Oh! press it close to thine again,
Where it will break at last.

The blow he so long expected had fallen at last, and the girl he could only love in secret was lost to him more than ever.

In his dumb despair he now realised to the full how great and how futile that love had been. Those two were together now; ere long they would pass side by side from the altar, where her father had given her away; and ere long the new-made

bridegroom would be worshipping the bright beauty of her sunny little face, his arm encircling her waist, and his kisses would be where his — Reginald's—had never been, on her brow, her hair, her lips; while he was here, on his couch, crushed, lonely, desolate, and longing only for death.

Suddenly the chimes rang out joyously and merrily in the square, ivied tower of the village church; but the sound brought no message of gladness or peace to the ear of Reginald Talbot. It came rather like the muffled knell that announces the hour of doom to the dying.

He made a wild essay, as if he would start to his feet—instinct with emotion, convulsed by an inward struggle—only to sink back among his cushions; while the old and attached servant, Bethia Barlow, ignorant of his thoughts, of all he felt and endured, burst in exclaiming:

"The joy bells—the marriage bells of Miss Amy —bless her little heart. You hear them, Master Reginald," she added, as if he was still a boy, as with clash and clang the notes came upon the

frosty air through the open window, where she had swept away the snow, that Melanie might feed the robins as usual.

Intent only on listening to the wedding chimes and the sound of cheering that came from the village, she did not remark the changed appearance of the unhappy young man, who looked, as he felt, dying.

As he reclined back, with closed eyes, he hoped the fiat had gone forth that would give peace to his over-taxed heart, and, so far as this world is concerned, oblivion to his soul.

A fit had come upon him—one from which he was long in rallying; and the dreadful announcement that he "was gone" were the first tidings that met Melanie on her return from the festivities at the vicarage.

But Reginald did not die, though left in a more prostrate condition than ever; and another shock of misery now awaited the unfortunate Melanie.

CHAPTER LI.

EVIL TIDINGS.

In the secluded district where Rose Cottage is situated there were no newspaper shops, with startling posters, to announce the great events of the time—even of the preceding day—at the utmost confines of the earth; thus Burmese news, like other news, came but slowly to the vicinity of Stokencross.

A day or two after Amy's marriage, and all the transient excitement thereof, came one which Melanie Talbot was never to forget.

In the air there was a strange stillness, that brooded something, she thought, by its actual calmness and sadness, and Melanie was just then impressed by that emotion, when a paper, a day or so old, was purposely left in her way by her Uncle

Grimshaw, and thereon, the first item that caught her eye was news from Burmah!

"Thank God!" had been Mr. Grimshaw's exclamation when he read therein.

Melanie now felt her heart sinking in her breast, and something prophetic of coming evil—a terrible fear—fell over hear.

The writer detailed briefly the capture of Myan Gyan, the advance to Ava, and what we have related elsewhere, with the subsequent fall of Captain Montressor, and the too probable death, after capture, of his friend Captain Montague Lonsdale, in the jungle, after the operations had concluded and the fighting was supposed to be over.

"As the bodies of some of Captain Lonsdale's party were found floating in the river, and all dreadfully mutilated, not a doubt remains," added the telegraphic despatch, "of the fate of that gallant young officer at the merciless hands into which he fell—Dacoits of the worst type. The subsequent discovery of his white helmet, battered out of all shape and covered with blood, has been deemed by

the Staff as ample corroboration of their worst fears—another valuable life lost in this inglorious war."

Twice, at least, she perused these awful tidings, and sat as if they had turned her into stone.

"Melanie!" said a voice—her uncle's.

A low wail answered him. Its very intensity made him shiver, yet he had in his hand, crushed up, a letter just received from Mrs. Chillington—a brief but exulting one.

"So, so, this is well," she wrote; "the wretch who has stood so long between that fool Melanie and wealth and rank is gone at last. End her nonsense at once; the girl can no longer have any excuse for delay. How I shall enjoy the Crystal Palace *fête* to-night!"

Like one in a dream, Melanie smoothed out the fatal paper with tremulous but tender hands, and carefully folded it, like one who knew not what she did.

In our lives, it is said, there are times—even moments—so filled with emotion that they seem to mark a turn in them—a turn we never, never

reach again; and so it was now with Melanie Talbot.

Uncle Grimshaw was not one given to tenderness, even in his best moments. He knew not how to console, even when he wished to do so; and in the present instance he felt only intense satisfaction, and continued to polish his bald head and twist up his absurd side-tufts, while he betook him to brandy and water, leaving Melanie to the care of old Bethia, who had been a kind of mother to her from childhood.

Passive, but faltering, she allowed the fatal print to be taken from her hand, as she was placed in a seat by the kind old woman, who watched anxiously, with pain and wonder, the great change that for a time had come over her. Melanie was, as yet, tearless. The slight colour had gone from her cheeks, the light from her eyes, and for a time she seemed more dead than alive as she sat drooping in an easy chair.

One hand was pressed heavily against her left side, as if a pain was there; her breath came in

fitful gasps, and her head reclined on the breast of Bethia, whose arms were around her.

Then the latter brought her some wine, and insisted upon her swallowing it. She made no effort to do so, and the glass rattled against her teeth till, with a low cry, she burst into a passion of tears.

A storm of sobs shook her slender frame, but were a species of relief. Bethia was not sorry to see the tears come—experience taught her that anything was better than the stupefied and despairing expression of that sad young face—the fixed horror of the haggard eyes; and when the sobs grew fainter and less frequent, Melanie reclined on the old woman's ample breast, like the child she had been, and wept freely.

So passed the first dreadful day of sorrow, and the night came, yet brought with it no relief from care—no escape from thought.

Taken prisoner and put to death by Dacoits—no trace of him found but his bloodstained helmet! Dead, after deeming her, perhaps, false, her letters having been intercepted, Melanie thought, as the

full force of all her misery rushed upon her life—a cold dark wave beneath which she bowed her head. Could she ever take up the prosaic duties of life again—when that life, her heart, her soul, all seemed to have left her ?

All that made existence worth having, worth hoping for, was a failure now, and nothing remained but a blank full of bitter and unavailing sorrow. But no sorrow can last in its first keenness, and in time she would realise that it would inevitably and inexorably be, in the words of Philips—

> By Time subdued—what will not Time subdue !

In the freshness and poignancy of her gief, his face, his figure, his eyes and voice came painfully, vividly before her in memory now—again and again more than ever, his expression when the first secret of their hearts escaped them mutually, and when she felt the tender touch, the clinging of the lip that first gave her a knowledge of all a lover's kiss contained.

How far from what she wished it to be, her treasured photo seemed now ; but how inexpressibly

dear it was—dearer than ever was a holy relic to the most pious devotee!

Save her brother Reginald, now more helpless than ever, there was no one to whom she could turn for genuine sympathy. Her heart seemed turned to stone, her brain was throbbing wildly—hearing nothing more, seeing nothing more, conscious only that a dreadful calamity had overtaken her—feeling deprived of power or coherent thought.

Sir Brisco Braybrooke sent his cards of condolence. This seemed a kind of mockery, yet it was not so on his part, for he was by nature a kindly old man, and hearing of the depth of her grief from the vicar and from Mr. Grimshaw he did not intrude upon her at first. When he did call he was somewhat shocked by the change in her appearance.

"In time I may hope to cure all this now," thought the baronet, while looking into the sweet pale face of Melanie, and listening to her low, vague replies, that filled him with sorrow and something of mortification, while she, sunk back in an easy chair, strove to shut out his bluff honest

visage, with its husky grizzled eyebrows and white moustache, as that of one who sought to come between her and the face of him who now lay cold and mouldering in a distant grave and in a place to her unknown.

"You will think lightly of all this sort of thing to-morrow," said Uncle Grimshaw, eyeing her with a sardonic glance, when Sir Brisco had taken his departure.

"To-morrow—what difference can to-morrow make to me?" asked Melanie.

"Much, I hope."

"How—in what way?"

"Because," said he, with an angry grin, for her grief intensely bored and disgusted him, "people view things differently, and are always much more sensible and amenable to reason in the morning than at night."

"What brings him here?" murmured Melanie; "how can he come when his presence torments me so!"

"And yet you owe him much for his kindness," snarled Uncle Grimshaw.

For days and weeks after this, with eager and haggard eyes, she sought and searched the public prints with nervous avidity for further tidings of Lonsdale—even for complete details, if such were come—of his death; but she sought in vain, for nothing of the kind ever appeared.

His name seemed to have passed away, his memory to be forgotten, and other men had taken his place. It was inevitable—

For the fashion of this world passeth away.

CHAPTER LII.

THE POONGYEE.

"EVERY hour," it is written, "we are sowing the seeds of character, which one day may astonish even ourselves by blossoming forth in actions of which we had not supposed ourselves capable."

So it was with Montague Lonsdale, who could have little foreseen all he became by the course of events, how patient and watchful, how wary, yet resolute, how capable of enduring and facing out to the bitter end, amid the barbarous people whose captive he became, all that he had to encounter.

In the jungle he had been knocked down by a blow from a clubbed musket; then he was dragged up, half senseless, with his face deluged in his own blood, and carried off, partly blinded thereby, by the Dacoits, for what purpose he knew not, helpless, disarmed, incapable of resistance. Thus it

was that, save his battered helmet, no traces of him was found by the searchers after the death of Montressor.

That he was reserved for some barbarous and protracted death—of ransom the Burmese Dacoits never thought—he had not the slightest doubt. His hands were tightly, painfully bound by a hemp cord, which—that it might shrink and inexorably tighten still more—was carefully and deliberately wetted, a barbarity under which several of our men died in the Chinese war, when their hands decayed and mortified below the wrists.

Through a district where the long reed-like elephant-grass grew to a vast height he was dragged or driven in haste, while the cord which fettered him began fast to occasion torture as it shrank; and his captors, true Burmese, though men of small stature, seemed capable of enduring great privations, being strong, wiry, active, and muscular; thus they urged him on without delay or mercy.

"In what we call bottom, these people are not inferior to Englishmen," says a writer in the *Bengal*

Harkarn, "and they resemble us in their love of luxury and similar amusements. In true bravery," he adds—incorrectly, we think—"they take the lead of all other Asiatics, as no one who has ever had an opportunity of seeing them at Rangoon will deny."

Lonsdale's captors mocked, grinned, and scowled at him, while chewing the inevitable betel nut, and jabbered and talked about him evidently; but ignorance of their language left him equally ignorant of their intentions, his only wonder being that they did not hack him to pieces and save themselves all further trouble on the subject.

Whatever their intention, it was evidently upset when they overtook two men bearing a third in a species of palanquin, and who, on seeing Lonsdale, uttered a shrill cry and issued an order in a peremptory manner.

On this, the cord that cut his hands was cut through by a sharp *dah*, and not a moment too soon, as he feared from the extreme torture he endured that a little more of such fettering would have nearly wrenched his wrists through, and

rendered him a cripple for life, or what was likely to be left of it.

He now discovered that his protector was the wounded man whom he had succoured a short time before, and whose bleeding limb he had bound up with a handkerchief—the strange-looking and aged Burmese, who, by his yellow silk attire, he now discovered to be a Poongyee, or species of monk—a personage of whom we have more to relate anon.

Not a word that he uttered could the luckless Lonsdale understand; but it was evident that the old man recognised him, felt grateful for the succour he had given, and made the Dacoits aware that he was to be spared and protected. Thus their menacing manner changed at once, under his orders and influence, though their covert glances betrayed hostility and baffled spite in the expression of their narrow, almond-shaped black eyes and flat olive visages, with huge cheek bones, narrow foreheads, and coarse jetty hair, all of which were indicative of the Hindu-Chinese type—for such the Burmese are—a people described by Father

Sangermano in 1785 as "servile, slothful, brutish, and false."

The undressed wound on his head occasioned Lonsdale intense pain and no small anxiety, when day began to break, and he knew that in time it would attain its tropical heat; while his captors were still proceeding — he knew not in what direction, save that by the position of the sun he supposed it must be inland, or to the eastward of the Irawaddy, far from the welcome sight of the smoky funnels of the river steamers—at once so suggestive of Europe, of civilisation, and of home.

By order of the Poongyee, some food—such as rice and cold fowl, with chillies and pounded fish, all taken, with other plunder, from a house they had passed—was given to him when the whole party halted to refresh, in a wild and lonely place amid the jungle scenery.

Meanwhile, the poor old Poongyee, who lay in the palanquin in agony, alternately fanning himself and telling over his rosary made of large seeds strung together, took only a little boiled rice,

served up on a green leaf, and washed down with spring water.

The sun was rising over the leafy wilderness, through which glimpses could be had of a misty grey horizon, overhung by clouds in masses full of brilliant tints and in the immediate foreground, where the halt was made, the lengthened shadows lingered till the sunlight pierced them.

The Dacoits in whose hands Lonsdale now found himself were twenty in number, and were Peguens, who inhabit the lower valleys of the great river, and a few Karens or wild tribesmen from the mountain ranges; and four or five there were whose bright red cotton tunics and baggy blue trousers showed that they were fugitives from the army of King Theebaw, whose reign had now drawn to a close.

Lonsdale knew enough of the Poongyees to be aware that with their strict ideas—for in their outward life and the observance of rules those of Burmah are more rigid than their brethren in Siam—such companions would not be the choice of the old man in the palanquin; but none was left

him just then by the force of circumstances, and they were in duty bound—after his accident from the random shot—conveying him to his monastery, where they arrived about nightfall three days after, and departed, leaving Lonsdale's head on his shoulders, but with evident reluctance.

However, he had not seen the last of them.

There he remained for some weeks, unable to effect an escape with the least hope of safety or success in making his way through poddy fields, water cuts, forests and wild jungles infested by savage animals and equally savage Dacoits. Without weapons, a guide, and knowledge of the language, it seemed impossible to reach the Irawaddy, where alone his desire might be accomplished.

He was ignorant now of all that was passing in Burmah, ignorant of the operations of our troops, as to whether they were still in the land of the white elephant or had returned to India, and of anything subsequent to the surrender of King Theebaw to General Prendergast, and that Bhamo had fallen to the latter—Bhamo, the great town of

Pegu, where the yearly caravan from China arrives laden with treasure, vermilion, velvets, umbrellas, and pheasants; ignorant also of Lord Dufferin's important proclamation, to the effect that "by command of the Empress Queen, it is hereby notified that the territories formerly governed by King Theebaw will no longer be under his rule, but have become part of Her Majesty's dominions, and will, during her Majesty's pleasure, be administered by such officers as the Viceroy and Governor-General of India from time to time may appoint"—*i.e.*, that Burmah was annexed by Great Britain, with its one hundred and fifty thousand square miles of country and four million of souls.

He was suffering meanwhile from his slowly healing wound, and saw with no small anxiety that his patron and protector, the aged Poongyee, was evidently sinking under the effect of his lacerated limb, which medical skill of a Burmese kind could not cure.

The monastery was rather untenanted just then. Many Poongyees had fled to the hills of Pegu in

terror of the British invaders, and some who had been found unworthy to be professed members of the service of Buddha had been stripped of their yellow garb, degraded and expelled, to resume a secular course of life.

Built near a pyramidal temple dedicated to Buddha, this monastery occupied the slope of a hill above a minor tributary of the Irawaddy, and though sick of his inactivity and apparently hopeless detention there, Lonsdale could not, as yet, complain of being either ill-lodged or ill-fed; for it was not then the three months of the Buddhist Lent, and offerings of fruits, rice, *ghee*, flowers, and so forth—apart from many other good things—came freely in from the devout, but nothing of the nature of flesh, as the strict religion of Buddha forbids the sacrifice of animal life for food, so far as ecclesiastics especially are concerned.

The most humble of all God's creatures was the poor Poongyee, who, in his spirit of gratitude, protected Montague Lonsdale, whom he, no doubt, would have sent to the British head-quarters had he possessed the means of doing so with any hope of

safety. He set no store upon the life he was evidently so soon to leave himself.

In the lives of these strange communities, Lonsdale saw much that had been, of course, hitherto quite unknown to him.

No priest ever kindles a fire, lest by so doing he may deprive some animal of life; hence he takes the simple food, bestowed in charity, just as he receives it from the giver. He is bound to procure that food by "the labour of his feet"; thus, in the early morning, Lonsdale saw them, as soon as they could "distinguish on their hands," setting forth from the monastery each with his *sabeit* or wickerwork basket, with which, but in deepest silence, he paused at each door to receive such cooked food as the devout chose to accord; and—like that of the *Sœurs de Charité* in Europe—the food thus obtained was shared with the poor and necessitous. In every convent is a *zara* or reader, who is treated with respect and awe. "They are held," says a recent writer, "in the highest respect by all ranks of the people, from the Sovereign to the beggar in the street. Their dress, their mode of life, their

renunciation of the world and its pleasures, draw on them the admiration of the laity. When they appear in public places they are the objects of the greatest deference, and all people, whatever may be their social position, give way before them. . . . Throughout British and Upper Burmah the respect paid to the order is everywhere apparent, in the liberality with which their wants are supplied, the size and beauty of the dwellings built for them by laymen, the respectful language in which they are addressed, the submissive attitude of those who appear before them, or in the pomp displayed on the occasion of the solemn cremation of their mortal remains after death."

So in the care of these people Lonsdale was safe, apparently, till Dacoits became rampant over all the land between Rangoon and Bhamo. Yet his impatience of the life he led grew stronger every day now that his wound was completely healed.

His thoughts for ever rose on his brother officers, on the regiment and what it might be doing, on the deaths of poor Digby Montressor and other good fellows, on the unfortunate Claire, now really a

widow in a distant land. More than all did his thoughts, of course, run on Melanie and how she might be situated. Had she heard of his capture—it might be of his death!

All these surmises coursed through his mind again and again, and knowing the malign stars that reigned over her destiny, his soul rightly foreboded the worst, and seemed to writhe within him, in his wild and eager longing to procure arms and quit his monotonous life among the Poongyees, not one word of whose language could he understand.

His protector's hours seemed numbered, and the latter was evidently sinking fast when there came to the monastery a Poongyee or Rahoan, who had once been in a Portuguese merchant's office in Rangoon, and who, in trade, had frequently come in contact with the British. Thus he had picked up some of that gibberish known as "pigeon English," by means of which he made Lonsdale aware of the progress of recent events; and that though Burmah was supposed to be conquered, and its king was departed, a great dacoitee was springing up on every hand; and that, weekly, fresh

troops, horse and foot, were pouring from Bengal into the land of the rubies; that hostile bands were springing up everywhere, that his existence in the monastery was known to some of these, and that if the old Poongyee, who was an influential *zara*, died, several were certain to come and demand that he—Lonsdale—should be delivered up to them, and they were certain to slay, perhaps impale him, with the greatest barbarity.

With this intelligence to think of on one hand, he knew, on the other, that in a country where every man's hand was against him, and where his race, European features, and complexion proclaimed him the foe of all, his chances of ever being free and in safety again were infinitesimally small.

CHAPTER LIII.

LONSDALE'S HOPE.

LONSDALE had barely time given him to consider the alarming nature of the intelligence he received and to think over what he should do, whether to trust to the course of events where he was, or seek safety elsewhere ere it would be too late to attempt anything, when, as a kind of crisis in his fate, the booming of the great bell in the adjacent pagoda announced that the aged Poongyee had died, or returned, as the phrase is in Burmah—where it is deemed undignified or impious to say that a priest ever dies—and immediately preparations began for the disposal of his remains, according to the rites of Buddha.

Every moment was of value now.

His chief protector in the monastery was gone, and little doubt was entertained of its only gate

being closely watched, lest he should attempt to escape thereby.

Lonsdale thought of the days when for cramming and high-pressure examinations he had, till his head ached, studied Colonel Clery's "Minor Tactics" and Captain Demangel's "Questions and Answers" thereon; but these in his present peril gave him no more hint of how to escape it than Chaucer, Burns, and Spenser, over whose absolutisms he had been compelled to eat his heart.

The Rangoon Rahoan or Poongyee informed him that he was about forty miles from the eastern bank of the Irawaddy—or *Airavati* as he called it—and that a rather wild and broken country lay between it and the monastery, full of forests, marshy poddy fields, and deep water cuts.

On this he ascended to the summit of the pagoda—in which was enshrined in gold a single hair of Buddha—a pyramidal edifice, some three hundred feet in height. Built of solid brick, it rose from a spacious platform, and was surmounted by an umbrella spire of iron tracery, so elaborately gilded that it shone like a mass of fire in the sunlight,

and at times was the eagerly greeted object of devout pilgrims from Indo-China, Siam, and Cambodia, in the far peninsula beyond the Ganges.

From this lofty spire he had an extensive view of the surrounding country, but he chiefly bent his gaze in the direction where he knew the great river lay.

The country seemed silent and deserted as far as he could judge, save for a few flimsy huts, the dwellings of pagoda slaves and those who were professional beggars, if not worse.

Then, too, he was aware that in the dense jungle and primeval teak forests were wild elephants, which found their way thither from Pegu, the tiger, the leopard, and the savage boar, while in the marshes and deep grass lurked poisonous snakes. Thus he had no ordinary risks to run ere he could reach the river, if even then he could get on board any of the flotilla or see a vestige of it, as the expedition must now be far up the Irawaddy, Bhamo alone being more than one hundred and sixty miles above Ava.

These thoughts filled him almost with despair.

His mind was a species of chaos when he descended from the summit of the great shrine and returned to the place or room set apart for him within a corner of the great brick walls that surrounded the monastery, in which arrangements for the solemn cremation of his late friend were in full progress— preparations that occupied several days, and which, as he was not present, fortunately for himself, bear no part in our story, though we may add that they were quite as repellant as those used by the Egyptians of old, prior to the interment of their dead.

About this time an alarm sounded one night throughout the whole edifice.

Dacoits in no small force were menacing the great gate in one quarter, demanding that the European barbarian should be delivered up to them, while a numerous band in another were discovered to be secretly at work, digging under the walls, with the intention of capturing whatever treasure they could lay hands on, as they knew well, of course, that many of the offerings of rich devotees consisted of white umbrellas of precious stuffs, with

ornaments of gold and silver, slippers and pillows covered with embroidery and precious stones, together with vessels of several precious metals.

Rumours of the vast wealth of this monastery had spread far and wide, as many of its chief devotees came from Pegu, where gold is found in the sands of the rivers, so that it is supposed to be the Golden Chersonesus of the Ancients, and there is a mountain near the stream named Khyer-Twen, where there are mines in which gold and silver, rubies and sapphires are all wrought at the same time.

With his heart beating wildly—all the more so that he was without the smallest weapon by which he could sell his life dearly, or revenge its loss by the death of another, Montague Lonsdale looked over the wall near the gate at the furious assassins whom he knew were clamouring for him, and thought that his fate had come at last.

It was an awful and bitter conviction for a brave young fellow, full of spirits, life, and energy, to feel that he was being thus entrapped, surrounded, run to earth like a wild animal, and would inevitably

be done to a terrible death without hope of mercy.

The most active and conspicuous among them was a Burmese of gigantic stature, deeply tattooed and wearing a white frock, well quilted, as the season was a cool one.

In the light of a torch, held by one of the assailants, he could see their tawny visages and floating dresses, their gleaming eyes and bright weapons flashing like mirrors, their long black hair unbound and floating, when, with the energy of the action, their top-knots became loose. One or two caught a sight of his fair European face, and with frantic yells fired their pistols at it, their visages seeming to become transfigured, as he saw them for a moment, contracted with fiendish malignity, and the almond-shaped black eyes flashing as if with flame, their white teeth glistening and set; and then he shrunk down behind the wall, over which the bullets were whistling, in utter doubt what to do, when suddenly a volley of musketry shook the darkened air, and the yells of the Dacoits seemed to pierce the starry welkin.

For a moment a glow of hope rose in Lonsdale's heart—the hope that a party of our own troops had come upon them ; but it was not so.

The tolling of the great alarm bell of the pagoda, booming out sonorously on the night afar over wild forests and rice-fields, scared those who were at work with their shovels beneath the walls ; while a rattling but ragged volley, flashing through the gloom, was poured into the others, announcing that they had been attacked by the armed followers of a Woongyee, or great lord, who was a munificent patron of the monastery, just as a great French baron of the Middle Ages might have saved a convent from being the prey of a Jacquerie.

The Dacoits were put to rout, and fled with yells of rage and fear into the recesses of the woods, leaving several killed and wounded behind them.

By dawn next morning Lonsdale went forth a few yards from the gate to see the scene of the late conflict, and there picked up, to his joy, a sharp and deadly *dah* or Burmese dagger, and that which was better, a six-chambered revolver, with six unexploded cartridges in it.

"Six Burmese lives to go ere mine is lost, I hope!" he muttered sternly, yet with a laugh.

He saw that the revolver was a British Government one, and thus serious doubts of its being serviceable occurred to him—these weapons and their ammunition, like our machine guns, so often failed in action; but the charges seemed all right, and with a sigh of genuine gratitude he concealed it and the dagger beneath his tunic.

But ere he turned to re-enter the gate he saw in its immediate vicinity a very appalling sight, but one that was thoroughly Burmese in character.

Eight of those wretches who had been assailants overnight had been taken, and by order of the Woongyee, were fastened to a lofty Bamboo fence, first by the hair of the head, the long coiled top-knot being unbound for that purpose, and then by the throat, with their bare limbs stretched out as far as they could be without dislocation, and thus, with underjaw fallen, their eyes open and glazed, and nude, all save a linen scarf, they hung in the blaze of the morning sun, ripped open, with the viscera dropping out, as a punishment for sacrilege.

Lonsdale had seen men too often battered, gashed, and torn in many ways by shot and shell in action; but this appalling spectacle proved too much for him and he turned away in horror.

However, an emotion of confidence came back to him now with the knowledge that he was secretly armed, and escape did not seem quite so hopeless. He calculated that once safely free from the vicinity of the monastery, wherein he was known to be lurking, by travelling westward at the moderate rate of fifteen miles a day, in less than three days he might reach the river, feeding himself as best he might on the way.

The obsequies of his late protector gave him additional hope of escape if he could only get forth into the open country among those who were to drag and escort the funeral car, thus eluding the watchful and sanguinary Dacoits.

The Rangoon Rahoan favoured, even suggested, this idea, and gave him a blue cotton Burmese frock, reaching to the knees, a sort of camise, with loose sleeves to cover his uniform, and an ample handkerchief of what the British call book-muslin,

to envelope his head and face partially in turban fashion. He also gave him some food in a species of wallet made of matting, to be ready for any emergency.

So the eventful evening of the old Poongyee's cremation came at last, for the bodies of all priests and persons of rank are burned in that region, while those of the lower classes and all who die under the age of fifteen are buried or flung into the river.

A stage twelve feet high was erected on a four-wheeled carriage ornamented with paintings and mirrors, and on the summit of this lay the coffin, wherein the body was half visible, but covered with gold-leaf umbrellas; red banneroles on bamboo staves were stuck all about it, and high over all rose an acute spiral pyramid of split bamboo.

With several priests upon it chaunting a monotonous dirge for the dead, the whole of the curious structure was drawn from the monastery for a mile or more, chiefly by women and boys, all shouting and laughing, followed by a great band of spec-

tators, of whom Lonsdale—disguised as we have described—was one; and the brief twilight was closing into night when the place for cremation was reached, the tributary of the Irawaddy, which was covered with gigantic lotus flowers floating on its glassy surface.

There was no weeping or wailing, but there was an exhibition of female dancing, which, to say the least of it, was rather strange, for the costume of the Burmese dancers, while descending to the ancles, is not closed by a front seam, so that like the Spartan girls, if Euripides belie them not, a great part of the limb is always exposed; and while the dance was in progress the resinous, oiled, and perfumed wood was heaped up in piles to form the funeral pyre.

At that juncture of the ceremony, when a whimsical contest ensues by an adverse pulling at the rear of the car, by a party who profess reluctance to leave the precious remains, till those in front prevail, Lonsdale, almost holding his breath in the keenness of his excitement, quietly drew aside and took his way into an adjacent wood,

heedless, or just then oblivious, of what wild animals it might contain.

As he proceeded with quickening steps he could hear upon the evening wind the booming of barbaric drums, the tinkling of bells, and the wailing of wind instruments mingling with the chaunting and shouting of the people.

Anon, a great and lurid glare shot athwart the sky and flashed through the vistas of the wood as if it came from a solid mountain of fire.

The night was clear, and the peculiarly rarefied and transparent atmosphere rendered objects distinct at a great distance; far into the recesses of the leafy wilderness through which Lonsdale took his way went the lurid glare of the flames, and the grotesque shadows they formed out of the strange trees and gigantic plants, till silence and darkness began to close together around him and he found himself alone and out in the night.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE DEAD PAST.

Despite the sniffs and sneers of Uncle Grimshaw, and of her fashionable aunt, Mrs. Chillington, Melanie had adopted a dark—all but black—dress and jet ornaments, as the only tribute her limited means would allow her to pay to the memory of her dead love, as she naturally deemed him to be.

And now she seemed to leave the days of her girlhood—neither careless nor quite happy days, certainly—behind her, and endeavoured in vain to probe her future.

"My poor Montague is lost to me," she said once, in an irresistible burst of grief; "but, thank heaven, not for ever!"

"Ah!" said Uncle Grimshaw, in perplexity, and not without anger.

"He has been faithful in his love to me, despite the duplicity of others; and I doubt not that when we meet in the next world nothing shall part us."

"Ah!" said Uncle Grimshaw again, with a shrug of his shoulders and a rasp up of his side-tufts with both hands. "But all that won't pay day and way in this."

"Ever one sordid idea," thought Melanie, drying her tears, in very shame that he should see them.

The visits of her aunt, who came more frequently now than before, were ever a source of annoyance to her; she was so cold and hard, so worldly and matter-of-fact, having not one iota of womanly sympathy about her.

"So, so; this Captain Lonsdale is gone," she said. "Can't you forget all about him now—as if he had never existed—as if all this episode had never happened in your life. It is easy enough, if you will only make the effort."

"Oh heaven, aunt! Let me die—let me die, if I cannot forget!" wailed the girl.

"Stuff! People don't die of your illusory ailment," was the harsh response of the old

woman of the world, whose sentiments belied her venerable beauty, her mass of silky white hair and pretty little hands and feet. "What is done can't be undone, and tears are useless, as well as unbecoming, now. They spoil the eyes and redden the nose."

"Just what I often say," added Mr. Grimshaw. "There is no use in crying over spilled milk."

"A vulgar aphorism, but a very true one. Do try to forget him, it is getting quite a long time ago now; and then, Burmah is such a long way off," said Mrs. Chillington, a little irrelevantly, but with a well-bred smile.

"I am glad we have licked the Burmese. As an Englishman I am proud of that. My conscience, I am."

"The next best thing for one's peace of mind, to having a good conscience, is to have none at all," said Reggie, who, reclined in his usual corner, felt deeply for his sister.

This remark made Uncle Grimshaw wince. He thought of the missing trust-money of his dead brother-in-law; but of that his niece and nephew knew nothing.

"It is said that we shall now have rubies and sapphires for a song," said Mrs. Chillington, slowly fanning herself, despite the season, by mere force of habit; "but that will render them too common for ordinary wear, and prisoners have reported—"

"The Burmese don't keep prisoners; ain't they cannibals?" interrupted Mr. Grimshaw, who, if he was, as he boasted, intensely English, was also intensely ignorant of the world at large, and hoped by this time that the subjects of King Theebaw had made a pleasant meal of Montague Lonsdale.

"In all this affair there is one comfort for you, Melanie," said he, after a pause.

"One comfort—in what—how?" she asked.

"Well, that as your engagement to him was but little known, if at all save to ourselves, you will be spared all impertinent pity and speculation on the subject, unless this ridiculous assumption of a sombre dress and black ornaments induces them."

"Exactly so. I have said this till I am weary of it," added Mrs. Chillington, who, as if weary of the subject, summoned her carriage and drove over to

Ravensbourne Hall—to report progress, as Melanie's heart foreboded.

"Uncle, you do not and never will understand me," she said, in a low, soft voice, after a long pause.

"Why?" he asked, sharply.

"Because I think when people grow old—pardon me—to your years, at least, they seem to become often benumbed and, I fear, incapable of suffering."

"Do they?" he snarled. "I wish you had a twinge of my gout, that's all."

"I shall never be happy again," said Melanie, almost to herself, as her chin dropped on her breast.

"That remains to be proved. Do you think, now, that if you learned to love another man you would be wronging Captain Lonsdale?"

"Yes; as much as if he had been my husband—in memory, I mean."

"Had been—yes—that is in the past tense; but he never was your husband."

"He would have been—but for fate."

"Anyhow, you are not, and never were his wife; so you can't affect to be his widow."

"Save in heart—in sentiment."

"Bosh. And this black dress is utter bosh, too," exclaimed Uncle Grimshaw, departing in anger. And so ended one of the many bitter conversations to which she was now subjected. Oh, how could they be so blunt, so coarse, so utterly unfeeling to her at this lamentable juncture of her life?

She wrung her slender hands in anguish and impatience, but was thankful to be left for a little time in peace.

Never again should she see him—never again. There could be no more stolen walks now in the Ravensbourne woods, no more meetings at the trysting-place beside the river, where the old trees cast a shadow on the floating water-lilies, with him she loved, with him who heard all her troubles, and in the sense of whose strong presence she had felt so confident and safe.

She sat gazing out on the sombre evening landscape with wide-open tearless eyes, thinking,

thinking, ever and always thinking, till her brain seemed to reel with the monotonous iteration of her own awful and miserable thoughts.

In the sky without, the lark looked like a dark speck, and the thrush made its last evening music amid the opening blossom of the blackthorn hedge that would soon be green. Already the rooks were cawing in the tall elm trees that overshadowed Rose Cottage, and in some places the snow still lingered where the early violets grew, while the raven, with hungry eye, looked down on the affrighted lambs in field and meadow.

How futile now seemed all Melanie's dreams in the past—dreams of love and joy that could never be realised.

What was the helpless creature to do now? This was about the very time when she had expected him home, promoted, or that she was about to go to him in the distant East and be married.

Uncle Grimshaw, though far from ill-pleased at the turn her affairs had taken, still looked grim indeed; yet she had no other future, it would

seem, than he could give—no other home than he chose to accord her, unless she left her equally helpless brother to his mercy and went forth into the world to earn her bread.

She looked at Reggie, and her heart felt ready to burst when she thought of all the handsome young sailor had been and what he was now.

Reclining on his couch near the window, he seemed more listless than ever, with a crimson *couvre-pied* her industrious fingers had made spread over him. He looked as if all that remained of his youth and manhood had gone, his hollow cheeks were pale, his large brown handsome eyes were more dilated than ever, more sad and weary, his hands were thinner and his voice more weak.

His future appalled her, more than that of the heedless healthy Dick—far more than her own.

Where had Montague died—in city, in forest, or the river? How had he met his death? Like a soldier—like a gentleman she could not doubt. Where was his grave, if he got one? His last thoughts—doubtless, they were of her.

Hope had gone, so strength of mind began to fail her.

Spring would come and go—summer with all its bright loveliness would follow—brown autumn next—so days and weeks and months would follow each other; but he could come no more. He had dropped out of her life—or rather the latter seemed ended, so far as object was concerned.

Where Montague lay there was a heart—and there her hopes were buried.

But Melanie forgot she was young, and that ere long the realities of the world would press themselves upon her. Just yet, however, she felt crushed, giddy, bewildered, till a kind of cold despair took the place of her more passionate grief.

And when once again the cold pressure and the threats of her two relatives were put upon her, she clasped her interlaced fingers and exclaimed:

"What shall I do—oh, what shall I do?"

Often did the words come to her white lips at this crisis.

On one hand she knew that by her sacrifice of self, Reggie would be free from her uncle's

uncomfortable home, and Dick have all his fondest aspirations of being sent to Sandhurst fulfilled. If not, she knew what was before them all—her "boys" especially, as she called them.

The gloom, the weary disgust—the longing to have done for ever with memory and thought, past and present, even with existence itself, the great longing for rest, were all strong in the mind of Melanie now.

Would a time ever come, she asked herself, when again she would smile, or laugh, or sing—or even work as of old, and take an interest in anything?

To Melanie, as yet, "the ghost of a dead past was a reality—an undefinable and even mysterious present."

CHAPTER LV.

WILL HE ESCAPE?

Once more we change the scene.

From the banks of the muddy Thames to those of the Irawaddy seems only an instantaneous feat now, as in our time we surpass the boast of Puck that he would put a girdle round the earth in forty minutes.

Lonsdale calculated, we have said, that he might within three days, or less, reach the eastern bank of that great river, which is to the Burman empire what the Ganges is to Bengal and the Nile to Egypt; and be within hail of some of the river steamers, if any were passing upward or downward just then, an important doubt on which he rather shrank from dwelling.

Full of the horrid aspect presented by the executed Burmese near the monastery, and too well aware

that some such fate awaited himself if the Dacoits caught him and had time to dispose of him in a leisurely manner, he hurried on, anxious only at first to get as far away as possible from the vicinity of his late place of captivity.

It was difficult to think of such barbarities being done in a land where education had certainly made good progress since last we fought them in 1852, when half the male population are said to be able to read and write, and when school-books are issued in the vernacular, setting forth the elements of mathematics, geography, astronomy, and human physiology; yet so it is.

He paused more than once to examine the edge and hilt of the *dah*, and the charges in the revolver, on which so much, to him, depended now; and when darkness was fairly in, he found himself in a locality famous for adventures in old romance, to wit—the recesses of a forest.

It was of teak, a species of tree which frequently attains the height of seventy feet, without a branch or twig, and then throws out a roof of foliage so solid and leafy as to exclude the rays of a noon-day

sun. There the darkness was dense then ; under such an umbrageous canopy in mid-air not a star was visible, nor could a ray of the most brilliant planet penetrate ; but the surface under foot was clear of all brushwood ; though, in places near the river, there grew jungle-grass more than twenty feet in height. For years these vast teak forests have supplied noble materials for the dock-yards of Rangoon, Madras, and Calcutta.

Around him was a solitude awful and oppressive. Elephants, tigers, bears, and leopards abounded, he knew, in the wild places of Burmah ; but none, as yet, disturbed him, and stretched among soft moss and the dry dead leaves of the past season he took his repose, and in the morning awoke to find that he had slept—actually slept long and soundly, and felt, though a little stiff, fresh and ready to face anything.

Extremes of heat and cold are seldom felt in Burmah, and the seasons are generally regular.

The light of the uprisen sun failed to penetrate the screen of interwoven foliage that spread above him so far from the earth. Here and there he

could see a blue patch of sky—no more; but far as the eye could penetrate, on every side, spread the mighty stems of the teak trees, rising in long, long rows like stupendous cathedral aisles, all seen by a species of subdued, yet clear and steady, twilight.

Save an occasional ichneumon, or rat of Pharaoh, gliding about among the dead leaves—scudding as rabbits do at home—no living thing was visible.

Which way was he to turn his steps?

The morning sun, he knew, was shining; but under that roof of horizontal greenery it was impossible to know east from west, as there was no shadow below it, the subdued light was so uniform; but after a long and careful consideration he found more of it in one particular direction, and conceiving that there the forest must grow thinner and be more open, he proceeded towards it, and found his conjecture correct. He reached the skirt of the teak wilderness, where the pepper, the capsicum, turmeric, and ginger shrubs grew wild, and saw before him an open and fertile country, on the woody *vertas* and abandoned rice

fields of which the sun shone brightly, and guided by its art he struck westward, by what seemed an old and forgotten path that was nearly hidden now by tall coarse grass and long flowering trailers.

The inhabitants—for the district was inhabited, from many indications that Lonsdale saw—must have fled, inspired by false terror of the British troops on one hand, and real terror of the blood-thirsty Dacoits on the other; and as a proof of their recent presence, after proceeding about two miles, he came upon a *zazal*, or rest-house, of comparatively recent construction—an edifice only about four feet in height, built of teak wood, with a broad roof projecting all round it—and Lonsdale, already somewhat weary with a march that was toilsome, devious, and over very rough ground, in a district strange and trackless, without guide or certainty, among rocks, old water-cuts, and places encumbered by the nutmeg, spikenard, and bamboo, all growing wild together, crept therein, and was fain to pass the second night of his freedom—assured that in it he would be safe, at least, from any of the four-footed denizens of the place.

For the second time, also, as he had to be careful of his little store, he examined it, and partook of what remained of the contents of the *sabeit* given him by the Rahoan, consisting of a piece of boiled goat's-flesh, with a few cherpathis of dough, toasted before a fire, and a mouthful of *shumshei* from a little china flask — the native stimulant, which tastes strongly of cocoa-nut oil, and has a greater odour of it.

When this food and refreshment was done, there would be but a slender chance of his procuring more, unless he reached our gunboats, or British shelter of some kind on the river or the land.

The next morning was somewhat advanced—the hours he knew not, having long since been deprived of his watch—when he again set forth, vaguely, but resolutely, westward; but he had not proceeded far from the sequestered *zazal* when he heard sounds—voices—in his rear; and while shrinking down among some tall grass he could see about fifteen or twenty armed Dacoits, among them the gigantic fellow with the tattooed skin

and white quilted frock, coming leisurely along, in Indian file, by the kind of path that led to the rest-house, into which, with the hope of plunder, they all went on their hands and knees; and then he stole swiftly away—away through the long grass as fast as its tantalising obstructiveness permitted and his limbs could carry him.

To his eyes there seemed something almost diabolical in the aspect of the tall Dacoit leader, as he had never before seen tattooing, which the Burmese generally use about the thighs alone, according to some travellers; but this man had it over the most of his face and neck, in strange concentric rings of black and blue—now the result of lamp-black mixed with the gall of the *mirga* fish. But Nicolo Conti refers to the hideous custom so far back as 1425, when he states that all Burmese, "both men and women paynte or embroider their skinnes with iron pennes, putting indelible tincture thereto."

Now the women never do it, and in complexion many of them are as fair and delicate as Europeans.

Just as Lonsdale had quitted that tedious and exhausting mode of progression among the tall coarse grass, amid which he saw more than one poisonous snake in dangerous proximity to him, and reached an angle in a narrow rocky path, by ascending which he hoped to find a place of concealment if necessary, an exultant shout echoed through the little valley wherein the *zazal* stood, and he knew that therein some traces of his recent repast had been detected by the Dacoits, who now proceeded to beat the bush, the grass, and everything else, in evident search for him.

CHAPTER LVI.

THE TATTOOED BURMAN.

Now for English pluck, and the muscular energy born of out-door sports in the cricket and hunting-fields, and in handling the oar and the gun. All were requisite for Lonsdale now.

Upward and onward he toiled, the path—for a beaten path it was he pursued—though narrow and half hidden by wild vines, laurel bushes, and capsicum plants, leading him higher and higher till the slope became the side of a lofty and rocky hill, and exertion strung every nerve and fibre, and his breath grew thick and fast, while his heart beat fiercely with rage and bitterness, but never with despair or fear.

So on he toiled, keeping well ahead of them, their voices, and an occasional random shot following him, for though they had not seen him

yet they were well assured of being upon his trail.

They were not less than fifteen in number; his revolver shots were only six, and all these, if any, might not be successful.

It was a time of supreme peril, and he conceived that he was now somewhere within ten miles of the Irawaddy.

A succession of wild yells that pierced the welkin suddenly announced that they had obtained sight of him, and this added spurs to his steps.

On one side the path was now bordered by a sheer and terrible precipice, far down below which he could see poddy and rice fields, intersected by shining water cuts, with here and there a ruined house, and in some places only gigantic guinea grass, amid which great grey boulders lay, and coarse-looking elks were grazing.

On the other side rose a wall of rock, without cranny or crevice into which he could creep and there sell his life as dearly as possible. In some places these cliffs were bare, and reddened by the splendour of a cloudless sun; in others they were

shrouded by luxuriant and leafy screens of wild vine, pagan fig trees, and fragrant flowers of the most brilliant colours.

Eight, at least, of the pursuers were now upon his track, and more than once their rifle shots, making the rocks re-echo, were sent after him, but went wide of the mark, as it was evident that these Dacoits were unskilled in the use of modern fire-arms and the mode of sighting them.

Now the narrow path, on reaching a point on the face of these precipices, began to descend at a steep angle, down which Lonsdale by one swift backward glance saw the tattooed Dacoit and two others, without taking time to fire, come rushing with all their speed, assured of overtaking him at last.

Just at a point where Lonsdale nearly lost his life by the path taking an acute angle or turn to the left, he shrunk close to a wall of rock unseen, and with a gasp in his throat and a sigh of prayer on his lips, at his own narrow escape—beheld, a moment after, to his intense satisfaction, these three leading Dacoits, unable to arrest the fierce

impetus with which they came blindly rushing down the slope, fly headlong over the precipice in quick succession, to be dashed out of all shape among the boulders, or drowned in the water cuts some hundred feet below.

They vanished through the air and from sight, without a cry or a sound in falling.

Without having to fire one of his precious shots, he had thus got rid of three; but the others, seeing their fate, came on more warily. One, who was in advance of the rest, now came to the acute angle of the path, but paused, rifle in hand, and Lonsdale by one deadly thrust of the razor-edged *dah* laid him at his feet, and sped on, haunted, oftentimes, by the glare of the dying man's eyes and his falling jaw, full of teeth, blackened by the betel nut.

Now there were but four—all armed, however, with rifles.

Whether their ardour was damped or not, Lonsdale could not tell; but after a time their voices ceased in his rear, and on listening intently, he could hear nothing of their footsteps; and

supposing they had abandoned the pursuit, and quite unconscious that they had made a detour and were hastening to cut him off in front, he proceeded more leisurely. After obtaining, with intense satisfaction, a glimpse of the broad and blue Irawaddy some miles distant, he continued to follow the path resolutely downward from the rocks and precipices into a flat and level district, covered with sand, jungle, and the inevitable gigantic wild grass.

He had seen the Irawaddy, but without a vestige of smoke from any passing steamer.

All trace of the path was lost now, but, guided by the sun, now verging westward, beyond the forests on the other side of the great river, he continued to push on in the direction where he knew the latter lay.

Noon was long since past now, and Lonsdale believed that he was now safe from immediate pursuit. But the Dacoits had never quite lost sight of him; and thus, just as the red flush of the farewell sun was deepening and crimsoning the face of the bluffs from which he had descended,

and when he found himself among grass that was fully ten feet high, a shot was fired at him from the front and came perilously near.

There was an impossibility of seeing the man who had delivered it. Lonsdale drew out his revolver, and though he but detected the thin blue smoke of the musket curling up amid the greenery, he fired in that direction at a venture, when a shrill yell of agony and a violent moving of the tall reedy grass to and fro told him that the shot had not been thrown away.

Another report rang out on the air, but further off and from a different quarter, and a second bullet, though almost fired at random, passed so near Lonsdale's right cheek that it grazed, yet did not break, the skin, and he felt as if the latter had been scorched or seared by a hot iron.

Finding all quiet after this, and that he was no more molested, he lay very still for hours, yet listening intently for any passing or approaching sound, and heard nothing save the hum of insect-life among the long grass where he was compelled to pass the night.

During the hours of the latter a heavy dew fell and well-nigh drenched him; and this, ultimately, proved perhaps the worst enemy he encountered.

Cold and damp, and chilled to the bone, he set warily forth again in the morning, guided only by the direction of the rising sun. On leaving the long grass behind and getting into the open, sharply and keenly he surveyed the ground on every side, but no human being was visible.

He felt intense thirst, but no hunger; he felt also a tremor in his limbs, a sensation of clamorous fear about his heart, and a giddiness—unpleasant symptoms for which he could not then account; while, like one in a dream, he pushed on resolutely, but vaguely, towards the river, at a place, where for about two miles inland from it, the whole district, though deserted, was studded with pagodas of every shape and size, and with images of Guadama, composed of that beautiful marble dug from the mines of Amaropura—the "City of Immortals"—equalled only by the finest in Italy, and thus monopolised by the Government for effigies in temples.

All about him were crumbling shrines and neglected lotus tanks; thus it was almost impossible to move a step without treading upon or encountering something deemed sacred there.

All this seemed like the fragment of a fantastic dream to Lonsdale just then.

Then he passed near a few cottages having roofs of grass thatch, gable ends of teak plank, with the other walls of matting or woven bamboos, their fireplaces wooden boxes lined with clay placed in the verandahs, from the roof of one of which he saw an empty child's cradle suspended by cords.

The place had been abandoned by the people, and then looted and partly burned by the Dacoits, whose lawless hands were against all men, like the Thugs and Pindarees of India in past times; and now before him he saw the broad waters of the magnificent Irawaddy, rolling in all their majesty, some two miles in breadth from bank to bank, but not a vestige of our flotilla.

For all he knew, it might have left the waters for ever.

He glanced about him now with a kind of dumb despair, for all his toil and peril had been faced in vain, and he felt weak, weary, and crushed by all the fierce excitement and tension of the nerves he had undergone for so long—for the last few days especially.

Near the deserted hamlet he saw three native boats, which had doubtless belonged to the inhabitants, moored near a rude jetty of stones and bamboo poles.

Selecting the smallest of these he got on board, after pulling out the plugs of the other two, that by scuttling them they could not be available for pursuit; and slashing through the rope-painter by one cut of the *dah*, he shoved off.

The craft was one of those graceful Burmese boats that can only sail with the wind, owing to being without any keel, and they usually carry one square sail, and when the wind fails they are poled along the bank. He contrived to set the sail, which was of tough matting, took the tiller, and speedily was out in the

mid-stream, and went gently southward with the current and the morning breeze, with only one idea—that the nearer he was to Rangoon the better, but at that point he was fully three hundred miles above Rangoon.

Becoming too weary to steer, he lashed the rudder in such a manner as to keep the sail full; and hours after that he was roused from a species of waking doze by the welcome sounds of steam blowing off, and then of more than one voice hailing him in English.

Starting up, he found himself close by a gun-boat.

She proved to be the Kathleen, and he was speedily taken on board; but though restoratives were given, he soon became delirious with fever and insensible to all about him. In this state he was conveyed to Rangoon, whither the Kathleen was steaming with a melancholy freight of sick men, and placed in a bungalow of the cantonments there, where for weeks upon weeks he lay hovering between life and death—"given over" by the doctors, as the phrase is—

weeks that to him were fraught with fatality at home.

"Poor fellow," said a shrewd Scotch surgeon, Major Squills, "he can't last long—he is going down the brae very fast now."

CHAPTER LVII.

DESPERATION.

Of all we have detailed in these two preceding chapters Melanie knew nothing, and too probably would never know.

Meanwhile, at Rose Cottage, each day passed like that which had gone before it—dull, empty, profitless; nothing pleasant seemed ever to happen, nothing at all; but now, as a gloomy change, deep sorrow had fallen on one, at least.

One thought was ever before her. Montague Lonsdale was gone, in the bloom of his strength and manhood, as she had seen briefly and coldly recorded, without comment, in the public prints; and she had a long life before her, perhaps—a life in which he could bear no part, save as a memory.

The doubt, that comes to all when the loved are gone, that we have in any way failed them, was

strong in the heart of Melanie now; while before her floated the recurring memory of tender words and caresses, of many sweet and graceful actions on the part of her two brothers in her misery—actions that knit the three together in affection at this sorrowful crisis.

Melanie knew that Lonsdale was the last of his race—the last of the old Lonsdales of Cumberland. She knew also that he had neither father nor mother, nor other kindred to sorrow for him, hence her own sorrow was all the deeper.

With all this on her mind, she had the hard pressure of her uncle and aunt to undergo in their views regarding her, for, as the former phrased it, "now or never was the time to put on the screw!"

Since the day of Amy's marriage, Reggie had become more helpless than ever, and his removal somewhere from his uncle's roof seemed to have become inevitable now, unless Melanie was ready to sacrifice herself.

"If life has no better promise than this, death were preferable!" said she.

"Rubbish! bosh!" muttered Uncle Grimshaw.

"It's hard enough," thought the girl, "to eat the bread of dependence, without having it flung in your face, as we three have."

And so, and so, a terrible conviction began to press upon her now, through all her sorrow and unavailing anxiety, that her fate would eventually be a marriage with Sir Brisco, for the sake of the two whose future seemed to depend upon it, and in the hush of blind desperation, to save Reggie from humiliation and to prosper Dick, she began to school herself to face the future in any fashion her Uncle Grimshaw and Aunt Chillington wished; while in their eyes, voices, and hearts there was neither compunction nor pity. So after weeks and months of despondency on one side, of taunts and sneers and bitter gloom on the other, Melanie, like a hunted creature, at last consented.

She would hear the last appeal of Sir Brisco.

Uncle Grimshaw chuckled hideously and rubbed his hands over each other in glee as he thought of the settlements, which he knew would be noble; and also, as he thought of the flesh-pots of Ravensbourne Hall. No more *rechauffés* of cold mutton,

with rice pudding and cheap Madeira—ugh! And then to think of Sir Brisco's rare old port—rare as to its bouquet and after taste, in glasses of six to the bottle.

Melanie only saw the net from which there was no escape closing its meshes around her.

"I must go through with it all—all to the bitter end," she thought; "there is no one else to care for me now," she added, aloud, unconsciously.

"A right view," said Uncle Grimshaw, approvingly. "Well," he added, looking at his watch, "in an hour Sir Brisco will be here for your final decision."

Terrified, perplexed, overwhelmed by grief and chagrin—grief for Lonsdale, and chagrin for the pitiful game she was compelled to play, an emotion of desperation, we call it, stole over her as she realised the fact that he was coming for a reply in sixty minutes, and that, by the end of these sixty minutes, the future of her young life would be decided. Yes or no.

When Sir Brisco came, her aspect, as she gave him her hand for a moment, chilled and mortified

him, as he was generously anxious to protect and befriend her.

He noted her plain dark dress with its jet ornaments, and knew why it was worn; he noted also her pallor and lassitude, but never doubted that in time all that would pass away like a summer cloud, could he but win her. Already he had said again and again all that he had to say on the subject; but now, momentarily chagrined, he paused.

"Then you will not have me, Melanie?" he asked, doubtfully.

Silent for a minute she remained, and then, while trembling from head to foot, she replied in a dry and husky voice—a whisper almost:

"Yes—I will marry you."

"You will?"

She bowed her head in assent.

"Just as I was beginning to lose all hope—Oh, Melanie!" he exclaimed with joy.

"But say nothing more—more I could not stand just now," she added, as she tottered to a seat.

She had promised, she thought, but the worst part was yet to come—the future, and like one unconscious of what she did, she sat clasping and unclasping a little jet bracelet on her slender wrist.

Satisfied with his progress, after lingering a little and hovering in a fatuous kind of way about her, he kissed her hands with old-fashioned courtesy and bowed himself out, feeling as if he trod on air in his triumph; and yet he was far from being a vain man.

That evening a suite of diamonds—necklet, earrings, and bracelets—came to Melanie, nestling brightly in their blue velvet case. "They are a trifle, when compared with the Ravensbourne diamonds, as you, my darling, will see, but they are family relics, and have, for more than two hundred years, been handed down from father to son," said the note that accompanied the gift.

Melanie closed the case without touching any of the jewels, and—as if to shield her from temptation—placed upon her left wrist the gold bangle sent to her by Lonsdale, his last and only gift from the far east.

She was certainly more composed when Sir Brisco came next day and found her alone again, doubly encouraged by her full promise and her acceptance of his gifts.

"Now you can have no reason for declining to hear me, Melanie," said the baronet, softly and earnestly, yet in a matter of fact way; but Melanie, who thought the word "now" referred to her recent calamity, felt there were tears in her heart and voice, while her soul sickened at the whole situation.

"In one short sentence I can embody all I have to say," he urged, stroking his snow-white moustache; "I love you, Melanie."

"And I can make you no return."

"Have you tried?" he asked, bending over her as closely as he dared yet.

"No."

"But why?"

She was silent—thinking the fatal promise of yesterday should content him.

"I do not ask—I cannot expect for a time, at least, a girl as young and beautiful as you to return my passion, but you have promised to be

my wife—my darling wife; friendship will grow day by day till it ripens into love, Melanie, if not of profound depth with you, at least such wifely affection as you can bestow, and with that I may well content me. I do not look for that wild love enthusiasts dream of, or romancers seek to depict," he continued, caressing the moustache which was, unfortunately, so white. "But it may—nay, must—console you, and record my worship of you, that I can befriend those you love so much, and thus smooth away the anxieties of your life."

She knew what he referred to, and, though her breast heaved painfully, she could only hang her head in assent; then she said,

"You mean to be kind, Sir Brisco, yet your words are repugnant to me."

"Repugnant—how?"

"They seem to bribe me."

"You wont tell me to-morrow that you have changed your mind?" he asked in alarm.

"No—why should I change it now—and for what?" she asked in turn, with a bitter smile. "Do leave me to my own thoughts," she urged.

"Be merciful, my sweet one," said Sir Brisco, who certainly felt that all this kind of wooing was strange; "give me your hand in mine ere I go."

Frankly enough she gave him a slim and ringless hand: then he suddenly drew her towards him and tenderly kissed—not her lips—but her cold and tear-wetted cheek.

"Now do leave me, Sir Brisco!" she implored, shrinking.

"As my plighted wife, Melanie—yes."

And he retired, fearful that he might hear some fatal response. But confidence came to him fast now, and when he came again he brought their bridal on the *tapis*, and said, as he drew her head caressingly on his breast,

"One kiss, Melanie, dearest—permit me—to show that we are something more than friends now."

"Oh—no—no!" said she in a low voice, as she shrunk from his arms with outspread hands.

The last kiss she had given was accorded to the only man who had ever saluted her—Montague Lonsdale—and she felt that it would be a species

of sacrilege to allow the lips of another to take away the charm of his last—his final farewell.

The baronet suspected as much, but only thought to himself—

"Stuff! how long will this romantic folly last?"

While Melanie thought, also, she was to be married now, and this sad superstition of the heart could not go on for life.

The baronet began to urge about the marriage now, but Melanie coldly, without a blush, but growing if possible paler than ever, would not hear of its taking place sooner than April.

"It seems an age till April!" said he.

"But, Sir Brisco—"

"Do drop that formal 'Sir,' dearest Melanie."

She remained silent.

"Long before that time I had hoped to see you enshrined at Ravensbourne Hall," said he, bowing over her hands in his stiff old-fashioned way; and yet, withal, it was not without its tenderness and grace.

CHAPTER LVIII.

HUNTED.

Melanie still mourned for Lonsdale as for one who was no longer in this world.

A few months ago—only a few months ago, was the ever-recurring thought, and he was living; but now he was with the dead of ages, passed away into his original nothing as if he had never been; and she was on the point of marriage with another. Well, to her that seemed only another mode of death too; and times there were when she actually thought to escape it by running away the moment the ceremony was over, despite the scandal that would be certain to ensue.

Often had she harrowed her heart by visiting the old trysting-place, watching the silent flow of the majestic river, as the sunset cast the shadows of the old elms into it—shadows repeated downward

so clearly that the eye could scarcely detect where earth and water met in that glassy mirror. The sky was blue as of old, the clouds as fleecy and white; but the wind seemed to sigh sadly through the leafless but budding branches of the trees overhead.

Then all the spell of the past would come upon her powerfully, and tears suffuse her eyes—bitter tears indeed—when feeling that she must lay by the old time, with all its memories and empty hopes, its tenderness and love, and think only, with a firm, or rather callous and indifferent heart, of the life that was before her.

"Do those who have left us know what passes on this earth?" she asked herself.

Surely not; for if so they could never attain to happiness and peace; but if it be otherwise, she thought, then Lonsdale must know that the sacrifice she was making was for others, and not herself.

She had to endure, almost daily, the visits of Sir Brisco, during which she seldom could sit still, but paced up and down the room like a hunted creature, with throbbing heart and brow; she was

thankful when, after a time, he had to go to London for a space to make some necessary arrangements about their marriage, and for that space she was left to herself.

No matter how oppressive his presence proved to be, she felt that she had no right to drive the poor man away from the neighbourhood by coldness that all would deem most misplaced now.

She would get used to him in time, she supposed, and to her state of existence—be able, at least, to sleep without dreams that harrassed and haunted her. Besides, to do him justice, Sir Brisco Braybrooke was ever so gentle, patient, and good to her.

Through the girl's brain such thoughts were ever coursing, even when she seemed to sit, passive and placid, in a low arm-chair by the fire, watched only by the sad gaze of her lame brother, after the curtains were drawn for the night, the lamp lighted, and she stared into the red embers with wide aching eyes.

Then, as if a fever came upon her, she would start up, when roused, perhaps, by the stroke of a

clock, throw open the window, push back her dark hair, and lean out for a little time to let the cold breath of the night fan her temples.

Anon, she thought she would rouse herself and seek some of her old occupations; but gardening had lost its charms for her, reading required concentration—that was impossible, ditto needlework, which would only give her leisure for bitter reflection. Then she tried her weekly accounts, as of old; but the figures danced before her.

And now the April days were stealing on—on to the hour of her fate.

Already the little children were gathering the early flowers and chasing the butterflies with mad glee, in many a green grassy lane, where the people of other years had trod to church and market, time out of mind. The trees were showing their bursting greenery fast—especially the elms that overshadowed the Cottage, the oaks in Ravensbourne Chase were putting forth their red buds, and the beeches their graceful sprays. The laburnum was shedding its golden petals, the plum trees were masses of unbroken blossom, and the happy birds

were building busily and singing merrily in every shady bower.

Dick was looking out his fishing tackle, for a new golden light was playing on pond and stream. A little time more and the flowers of May would be all over the land.

Ere that time came—Melanie clasped her hands and shivered.

Engaged! If, but three months ago, anyone had told Melanie she would be so, she would have deemed that person or herself insane.

Now Sir Brisco's coloured miniature, on opal, with burly eye-brows, grizzled upright hair, and white moustache, was to replace that of Lonsdale, with his handsome young face, his keen soldierly eyes, close shorn dark hair and darker moustache—his general expression of a pleasant and purpose-like fellow, who, as the mess used to say, could do anything, "from holding his wicket at Lord's to facing the devil in his shirt-sleeves."

Even her brother Reginald, for whom she was chiefly making the sacrifice, reprehended the coming marriage. This did sound hard; she

could neither explain nor retort—she was too affectionate and too gentle; but she felt, just then, as if life was over with her, and in her exhaustion and faintness, when turning to leave the room, her knees bent under her and she tottered.

The new turn of affairs partly puzzled little Amy Musgrave, who, when on a visit to the vicarage, bright, merry, and in all the flush of her own happiness, said to Melanie:

"I wish so much to ask you a question—but—" and then she paused, though their arms were entwined.

"Ask," said Melanie, wearily.

"With all my old love for you, I have perhaps no right—"

"I never had a secret from you, Amy."

"Well—do you really intend to marry Sir Brisco now?"

"Now!" Melanie repeated, and then burst into tears at all the word implied.

"I do not like this marriage—this May and December business," said Dr. Brendon, when

Melanie had gone; "she seems to be selling herself for wealth and position."

"Nay," said his kindly old better-half; "think of her friendlessness, her uncle's character for meanness, her brother's dependence. I hope they will both be happy."

"So do I, good wife—but you mean together."

"Of course."

"Ah—but I mean apart," replied the doctor, cynically. "Melanie Talbot's heart is not in this affair, but with the lad who has found his last long home, so far, far away. God rest him! Montague Lonsdale was thoroughly an English gentleman and soldier."

The time drew on. Melanie did not wish any wedding cake or breakfast, in a wedding-sense—or bridesmaids, or fuss; all was to be as quiet as possible, to the intense disgust of Mrs. Chillington and to the disappointment of Sir Brisco, who was vain of his young bride.

"What do you mean, you eccentric girl?" demanded Mrs. Chillington.

"In what way?"

"No breakfast—whoever heard of such a thing?"

"There seems no one to invite, aunt."

"Acquaintances are easily found."

"Perhaps—but how many friends?"

"Is it usual to have a marriage in this hole-and-corner way, and with a man in Sir Brisco's position?"

"I do not know what you mean. I shall be married in Stokencross Church."

"By that old country frump, Dr. Brendon; why not at St. George's, Hanover Square?"

"I am an unknown girl—Dr. Brendon will do all that is necessary."

"Be that as you please then, but ere long no one in town will be better known than you, Melanie. Sir Brisco's wealth and your beauty will achieve great things. We shall see your photo in every shop window—the Braybrooke costume, the Braybrooke hat, the Braybrooke orchid, or something so named by gardeners—the Melanie waltz—you will become the rage, my dear! Your laces will be priceless, your furs the envy of the Empress of Russia."

And the little woman of the world laughed loudly in her glee.

"We English people are supposed to marry for love," says a writer, somewhat cynically; "but as a matter of fact we marry for fifty thousand other causes that have nothing to do with it; but woe to the rash couple who are indiscreet enough to own their fidelity to the selfish national tradition."

However, nothing short of a miracle could alter the destiny of Melanie now.

CHAPTER LIX.

A FATAL PARAGRAPH.

In a bungalow built of bamboo, thatched with elephant grass, and having a broad verandah for coolness in summer, lay Montague Lonsdale, stretched on a charpay or native bed, unconscious of all the world about him, of the fierce war that was still being waged with Dacoits, hundreds of miles up the great river that rolled past the cantonments to the Bay of Bengal, and ignorant or oblivious of everything else.

"Bad case — very—hopeless, indeed!" said Surgeon-Major Squills, as he removed his cigarette and looked at the delirious and unconscious patient writhing on the cane couch, and beckoning to a hospital sergeant, he scribbled a memorandum

in a book—anent the case, and a prescription therefor :—

"*Febris Remittens* — Rangoon. . . March. Shivering last night—hot and giddy, listlessness, languor and delirium increasing without remission. Skin now burning hot. Pulse full and frequent—tongue quite white—bad case—very.

"*Applice. Lotis frigidæ cassuti.*

"*Affusio frigidæ stat.*

"*Capiat calomel et ext. Colocynth comp. aa gr.* x *stat., &c., &c.* See to it, sergeant."

"All right, sir." He saluted and withdrew, and so on went the visits and prescriptions for days and days, ere, to Dr. Squills' surprise, a turn came. Nature began to assert herself, and the patient slowly to recover and with the recovery came the longing to go home; and the craving for a letter with news of her—the letter which would never come now—was strong in his heart, with the hope of sick leave, and health and strength to travel.

"No letter—no letter—after all!" he muttered, and tried to console himself with the old adage

that "no news was good news"; but in vain. He did so hunger for news of Melanie, from whom one line would be, as it were, a glimpse of Heaven, circumstanced as he then was; for she seemed somehow to have drifted out of his life.

"I don't think I shall die, doctor, this bout," said he, with a sickly smile.

"Of course not."

"Of course not; yes, those whose lives are of no use to themselves or anyone else never die."

Squills knew not what to make of this cynical response, so he lit a cigarette and said nothing.

Around them both were frightful scenes of human misery and human suffering at this time —for cruelly treated were our soldiers who were wounded or invalided on service in Burmah. "We remarked yesterday," says the *Rangoon Times*, "that they were experiencing great hardships and receiving very meagre allowance from the Commissariat Department; and it has come to our knowledge that these poor fellows, some wounded and others in the last stage of dysentery, are put on board the river steamers without

beds or proper attention, and, in fact, without arrangements being made with the steamers even for their messing. Men who are mere living skeletons are to be seen lying on the bare decks, and the diet the medical anthorities seem to think best for men wounded or suffering from dysentery is that vile compound known as Chicago beef, dry biscuits, and a little tea and sugar tied up in a piece of dirty gunny."

One steamer on the Irawaddy—the Secundra —carried nine hundred men, though she had only accommodation for six hundred. They were "packed like sardines in a box," wrote one of the West Surrey Regiment, without air to breathe, and several expired of heat and apoplexy. Among them, one man, who had struggled so far as the companion-ladder to get a little air and sleep, was thrown into the river.

So it is ever with John Bull in any war. He has ever shown himself to be the incarnation of greed, meanness, and mismanagement, for though John likes glory, he is shabby enough to like it cheap.

Lonsdale was a great dreamer during his protracted and intermittent illness at Rangoon—born of what he had undergone amid the dewy marshes. He had almost begun to believe in mesmerism of a certain kind, and to think—to hope, that when he dreamt of Melanie she also was dreaming of him. It was a wild idea, but the outcome of all he had undergone made him a dreamer by night and day, who ever saw a sweet face with pathetic eyes raised to his, and felt in his a small white hand, with the sound of a voice ever haunting him, even as an old melody lingers in the memory. But does not Sir William Hamilton tell us that, "however astonishing, it is now proved, beyond all rational doubt, that in certain abnormal states of the nervous organism, perceptions are possible through other than ordinary channels."

Anon, a change came over the dreams of Lonsdale, born perhaps of these very perceptions, for when at last he slept—by snatches—they were full of hazy and horrid visions of some great evil that overhung him—something dim, dire, and not to be encountered.

His good constitution prevailed over his illness. He "pulled through," as the phrase goes, in spite of all medical predictions to the contrary; and in a few weeks was able to ride about Rangoon on a native pony, one of those stout and singularly strong little animals that are not more, usually, than twelve hands high, but are ever rough-coated and ungroomed. Thus mounted, he daily traversed Merchant Street, a broad and spacious thoroughfare, having lines of trees and grass plots before its double rows of varied mansions, some of which are of European aspect, so far as cornices and pilasters go; others, native, built of wood and bamboo, materials which do not indicate poverty, but are used, being light and portable.

Such edifices are all built on piles or posts, in consequence of the occasional inundations that roll beneath the first floor, and many have noble galleries, graceful verandahs with elliptical arches, above which are broad projecting roofs, all of Anglo-Burmese architecture, being the residences chiefly of Europeans, and over all towers the

great Golden Dagon Pagoda, with its new umbrella, erected since the war of 1852.

As the Burmese women are not shut up Mohammedan fashion, but mix freely in all social gatherings, Lonsdale could see them working at their looms, with men beside them, gossiping and flirting—a true Burmese art—while their slender fingers wove deftly the stuffs of brilliant silk or cotton. Elsewhere were diminutive damsels squatted in the lower verandahs, behind stalls of fruit, betel nut, cigars, with a British sailor or "Tommy Atkins" lingering near and "airing" his pigeon English.

One day—he was never to forget it—he came back from one of these rides, and with an emotion of thankfulness in his heart, felt stronger, and had many a hopeful thought of home. He sought the mess bungalow to get some iced drink, when he found that the mail had come in from Europe, and the last London papers, then several weeks old, were being conned with avidity—all looking first at the latest news prior to taking the rest at leisure.

He got one—the *Times*—and after running his eyes over the news vaguely for some time, he alighted on one tiny paragraph that gave him a dreadful shock, and for a moment or two the power of sight seemed to leave him, ere he could read it again and disentangle one line from the other.

"The marriage of Sir Brisco Braybrooke, Bart., of Ravensbourne Hall, Oxford, with Miss Melanie Talbot, only daughter of the late Captain Reginald Talbot, of H.M. Bengal Army, will take place to-morrow at Stokencross church. The ceremony, we understand, will be performed by a bishop —a near relation of the bridegroom—assisted by the vicar, Dr. Brendon. Our correspondent adds that after the ceremony the happy couple will leave for the Continent, but return to Ravensbourne Hall before the meeting of Parliament."

The paper dropped from his hand on the floor, and he never looked at it again. There seemed no doubting it. The statement was too circumstantial; and by that time the whole dark episode—dark to him—must have been over long ago.

The world—the "penny-a-liner" world, he knew, was at times given to marrying people with or without their consent. But this notice was in an important journal, and would be no mere "Society paper" *canard*, and with this conviction came the thought that he was so far away and so helpless that he could neither learn the best nor worst.

In a moment or two may seem to be assembled the agony of a lifetime—the heart to receive its death wound, with the knowledge that the world will never, and can never be the same to us again.

The best part of his life had gone from him.

"I shall never be the man I was!" he thought, as—in defiance of Dr. Squills' orders—he got from the mess khansaman a stiff jorum of B. and S., and drained it at a draught.

Weak though he was in health he now thought that he would not leave India or Burmah, or return home; for what purpose should he go there?

"No letters," he muttered; "no letters! Her silence is fully accounted for now. Fool—ass, that I have been."

He manipulated a cheroot, put it in his mouth, but forgot to light it, as he strolled, like one in a dream, away to the quietude of his own lonely quarters.

"Marriage without love I have heard stigmatised as being as much a sin as love without marriage," he thought bitterly. "Can she really have cared for me, after all? Can she have felt that deep love which, we are told, never changes, and ends but with life, such as I—poor fool!—from the first hour felt for her? It could not be!"

Yet, anon he remembered—could he ever forget it?—what cruel pressure might have been put upon her by her relations. Of the letters that were intercepted, he had never yet received any explanation; of the false rumour of his own death, he knew nothing, or of all the doubt and grief it caused; and yet, amid all the terrible thoughts this unexpected intelligence roused, the soft face, the tender eyes, and touching voice of Melanie seemed to haunt him.

So this was the haunting evil he dreaded, that had come to him in his feverish dreams, and for

which he could find no name. But he seemed to have foreseen it all in his dream, when at Rangoon before, of the shadowy marriage group in Stokencross church—one so powerful that he had never forgotten, though deeming it only one of those visions of the night that come unbidden. "But seeing in dreams," says Dr. Ennemoser, "is a self-illuminating of things, places, and times—for relation of time and space form no obstruction to the dreamer; things near and far are alike seen in the mirror of the soul, according to the connection in which they stand to each other, and, as the future is but an unfolding of the present, as the present is of the past, one being necessarily involved in the other, it is not more difficult to the untrammelled spirit to perceive what is to happen than what has already happened."

Could it be that in the past he had foreshadowed the present?

"It is impossible!" he exclaimed to himself; "and well it is for us that we can neither know nor foresee all that life may have to bring. I shall get over it, I suppose—life is made up of

getting over things; I never loved any one before, and certainly am not likely to do so again."

But with all this attempted philosophy, very desolate and loveless seemed the future before him now, and weakness of the body, which returned in a great measure now, re-acted on his mind, and, at times, he knew not whither he wandered or what he did. The bright sky had grown dark apparently—hope and love and the energies of life were gone; but it was chiefly when darkness fell over the hushed cantonments, and the last bugles had sounded, that he felt most alone in his desolation; for he had no friends or chums there. Some were in their graves, others with the regiment, far up country, hundreds of miles away, beyond Ava and Amarapura.

If the terrible tenor of that paragraph was true —could he doubt it?—he would never, could never hate Melanie, nor ever cease to love and pity her, though lost to him for ever. Some dreadful arguments, some harrassing alternatives, must have been applied to her by those selfish relations, at whose mercy she was placed; but, anyhow, he

would remain in India or Burmah, he cared not which, and never return to England for long years to come.

So he thought; but the hand of disease was still heavy on him, after all he had undergone, and the fiat of a medical board was peremptory. He was, at that time, unfit for service in the field, and was invalided "for home," yet in charge of other sick, some of whom were worse than himself.

At this juncture the "blind goddess" viewed him with some favour. A relation, of whom he knew little more than the name, departed this life and left him £2,000 a year.

How welcome this accession would have been once. How little he valued it now! With whom was he to share this little fortune, if not with Melanie Talbot? And she was lost to him for ever.

The future seemed such a frightful blank. Of what might happen in the years to come, he never attempted to speculate, save in the possibility that in a soldier's death somewhere he might find oblivion of all.

Luckily such thoughts do not last for ever, and sick though he was, he had to "pull himself together," and look after his invalids, see to the medical reports, the returns for Netley, and other prosaic matters.

"Lonsdale has a wonderful recuperative power — a great nervous force," said Surgeon-Major Squills; "but he is not out of danger yet, and I should not wonder if he went over to leeward in the Bay of Bengal, with a cold shot at his heels!"

And with this — to him unknown — sentence before him, with weary and indifferent eyes, Lonsdale saw the white trooper clearing the waters of the Rangoon River and heading away towards Baigue Point, along the Dalla coast. It seemed but yesterday that he and poor Digby Montressor had stood side by side looking on it together. Ere long Elephanta Point, and then the Aguada Reef, with its lofty granite lighthouse, sank into the sea on the starboard quarter, and the great transport, with its freight of sick and wounded, bore away into the vast Bay of Bengal.

CHAPTER LX.

THE MARRIAGE.

And now we must go back a few weeks in our narrative, to where we left the inmates of Rose Cottage, as it was named—though a small two-storied villa.

"There is a glamour in love," some writer tells us, adding, perhaps with truth, that "what we love is not the tangible man or woman, as the case may be, who lives, breathes, and exists, but the fancy of our own hearts—the ideal that we have created out of our own unsatisfied longings."

Be all that as it may, Melanie had no such thoughts—and yet her marriage was close at hand now, painfully close—as it was a contract in which her heart had no share; a degrading one she felt it to be.

So, at last, but one day intervened.

Melanie had not watched the papers for some time past, as a kind of curious indifference to everything, a kind of dumb despair of her future, possessed her now; but had she seen the only paper that came to Rose Cottage, even on the morning of her marriage, it might have changed that future indeed.

Uncle Grimshaw had looked, however, and seen sufficient to make him conceal the newspaper in hot haste.

The intelligence he saw was sufficiently startling, especially at such a crisis. It was to the effect, "that Captain Montague Lonsdale, who disappeared after the capture of Ava, and had so miraculously escaped the Dacoits, reaching our gunboat Kathleen on the Irawaddy some time before, was now coming home in charge of sick and wounded men from Rangoon!"

"Coming home!" muttered Uncle Grimshaw; and, as he concealed the paper, something like a malediction escaped him, and he hurried away to see Mrs. Chillington, who had taken up her quarters at Rose Cottage "till the event came off."

Melanie was thinking of her future when married to Sir Brisco. She contrasted her years, barely twenty, with his, over sixty; and knew that when she was forty, if spared, he would be an aged and helpless creature of eighty—helpless, perhaps, as poor Reggie.

On her marriage morning she was somewhat like an automaton in the hands of Mrs. Chillington, old Bethia, and more especially Mademoiselle Clochette, to whom was chiefly assigned the duty of attiring her; while her "affectionate aunt" had duly brought her well-hung carriage for her use, with the powdered coachman duly accoutred with bouquets and breast-knots.

"There never was a bride more beautiful than you, Miss Talbot," said Clochette, in her broken English, as she fastened a sparkling spray of the Ravensbourne diamonds among the dark masses of Melanie's hair. "*Mon Dieu*—it is a romance to regard you! *J'en suis en extasse!* You are *parfait!*"

And she was so—perfect from her splendid hair and snow-white neck to the tips of her satin

shoes—but ah, so painfully pale, rigid, and indifferent to all appearance.

* * * * * *

"With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow."

Uncle Grimshaw heard the words, perhaps more distinctly than she to whom they were said, and he thought joyously of Ravensbourne Hall and all its concomitants—the settlements and so forth.

Melanie heard the solemn words of promise, and they seemed to echo through the old vaulted church of Stokencross, first in the vicar's soft and sonorous voice, and then in the firm and quiet tones of Sir Brisco, and as they fell on her ear, the shadow that sat enthroned in her heart—the shadow of him, who she deemed had found a soldier's grave so far, far away, seemed to rise upbraidingly before her.

She dared not then lift her eyes, even for a second, to those of Sir Brisco, nor cared she to do so.

"With my body I thee worship." As he said this, she felt his strong, firm hand clasp hers

closely; but it felt—she was conscious—singularly cold and clammy just then.

Why?

Her long dark lashes drooped and remained so till the close of the ceremony.

Nor did she lift them when Dick, with tear-wetted cheeks, sprang forward to claim the first kiss in the vestry, for, boy though he was, he knew enough to feel that Melanie had sacrificed herself for Reggie and for him.

No bishop was present, as the paragraph had it; but among those in church were Mr., Mrs., and Miss Plantagenet Pugwash, uninvited, however, to their own considerable disgust.

All that followed seemed a dream to the chief actress therein. The register was duly signed in the damp old mouldy vestry, or whilom sacristy in England's older days; and there were two signatures side by side that seemed odd—most strange to Melanie—as the pen dropped from her fingers.

Then Sir Brisco drew her hand over his arm, pressing it to his side, and they issued forth, while

on the wheezy old organ was performed something that was meant to be Mendelssohn's Wedding March; and they passed through the usually deserted and sequestered churchyard, now fully crowded, for all the "country side" had gathered to see the marriage of their popular landlord with the sweet young lady whom the poor knew so well; and a few well-meaning folks, with their children, all smartened up for the occasion, strewed flowers upon the path before the wedded pair.

"She looks like death—a corpse—more nor a bride," Melanie heard one whisper near her.

"Better be an old man's darling than a young one's slave. I was none the 'appier for marrying a young un," said another rustic.

"She'll soon be rid of him; he'll croak anon," was the consolatory remark of a third cronie.

Melanie recalled this speech with dismay ere long; but meanwhile the familiar bells were jingling merrily in the ivy-clad tower of the Anglo-Norman church, half-drowned by the cheers of the rustics.

Under the moss-green lych-gate Melanie was led by Sir Brisco to his carriage, with all its heraldic

bravery—a shield azure, fretty *argent*, supported by lions, winged; and to her, the dream seemed only protracted as she entered it—protracted in all its painful details.

As she put a foot upon the first step of the carriage she reeled, and would have fallen backward but for the ready arm of her watchful husband; but she recovered herself, and half repelled the caressing assistance.

"It is nothing—nothing," she murmured through the folds of her long veil.

The marriage breakfast at Rose Cottage, the speeches, the health-drinking, and many a flattering reference to herself, sank like iron into Melanie's soul, especially when she heard the mockery—for utter and bitter mockery it was—of the speech of her uncle, Mr. Gideon Grimshaw; and to her it was almost a relief to turn and watch Dick, who, among the jellies, trifles, and fruit, was enjoying the fleeting present; who already saw himself, in imagination, a full-blown cadet at Sandhurst, in the "near point" affected at that institution; and in addition to his marriage favour

he had bestowed on Bingo more bones than that quadruped could bury in the garden for his future delectation.

So after a time, Melanie, who had to don travelling costume, hastened to her own room—the room in which she was now to find herself for the last time; while the domestics were collecting the old slippers and rice, to throw after the wheels that bore away the wedded pair.

To her, the wedding breakfast had seemed an intolerable phantasmagoria. She had heard people talking and making merry, but their voices had seemed strange and unfamiliar, even as her own husky whispers sounded afar off; while to swallow anything, even a glass of wine, was an impossibility.

CHAPTER LXI.

THE UNFORESEEN.

Alone—for a little space—at last! She would have it so, and would admit neither effusive bridesmaids nor fussy domestics, like the gushing Mademoiselle Clochette.

Terrible thoughts pressed thick and fast upon her. As has been written of a young girl similarly circumstanced, she knew that the placidity and contentment of middle age might be hers; but the smiles and tears, the intense delight, the fears, the exultation of early hopeful years, the fresh spontaneous love that gives itself unconsciously—she had renounced them all!

How confused and strange were her reflections as she sat there in her long veil, her blossom wreath, and all her bridal bravery.

A wedded wife she might be—nay, was—but she felt herself still to be Melanie Talbot.

The golden hoop on the third finger of her left hand told its own tale, and yet the whole of the past ceremony and the present situation would seem more than ever a dream on the morrow.

The morrow! Little could the new made Lady Braybrooke foresee the close of this—her wedding-day.

Melanie was more than ever pallid. Her very lips were white, and her violet blue eyes were so shadowed that they seemed almost black. There was something strangely solemn, too, in her aspect, as of one who had passed through a cruel and terrible ordeal.

"Oh, uncle, be kind to me," she wailed in her loneliness of heart, when he, to her surprise, entered her room in haste, after a hurried knock at the door; "be kind and help me."

He regarded her strangely, and his face wore, for him, an expression of deep concern and dismay.

What could this mean?

"Oh, uncle," she resumed, with eyes cast down, "I feel myself like a widow rather than a wife."

And she looked, not at her wedding hoop, but

Lonsdale's engagement ring, which had never left her finger since he placed it there perhaps.

"You are a widow," said Uncle Grimshaw, in a low husky voice.

"What do you mean?"

He hesitated, and knowing how he had coerced her, her anger began to rise.

"Leave me for a little, uncle," said she; "even the bridesmaids and Clochette have not come to assist me. The carriage, I suppose, is at the door already; but I cannot go away yet with that man. Oh, no—the future does seem terrible now."

"It cannot be worse than the present," was his gloomy reply.

"What do you mean?" she asked again.

"Compose yourself—"

"For what next?"

"To hear what I have to say—to tell you—an awful shock."

Her first thought was of Lonsdale.

"News—from—Burmah?" she asked faintly.

A rough malediction escaped Mr. Grimshaw.

"No—your husband—compose yourself—"

"What of him?"

"He is dead."

"Dead?"

"He dropped down in a fit and died ten minutes ago; and you—you are already a widow."

Melanie, who had risen from the toilet-table, on which she had thrown her wreath, her veil, and some of her diamond ornaments, fell backward into a chair, and for a time all became blank to her.

. . . . . .

Voices after a time reached her.

"Poor girl—poor thing—poor, dear Lady Braybrooke—how sad, how awful!"

They were the voices of Mrs. Chillington and a few other ladies, of the bridesmaids and Clochette, as they all fussed about her and impeded each other.

How strange was the destiny of Melanie. Like she of whom Gerald Griffin sung, she was now

> In one morning-tide
> A wife and a widow,
> A maid and a bride.

After the awful strain, of the last weeks especially, she felt stunned—strange, more bewildered than ever. Could it be that she was free—actually

free? But what a price—the life of a really good man. And was it not a sin to think she was free?

Uncle Grimshaw now told her that Sir Brisco, with all his appearance of sturdy and animal health, had a mortal ailment, known to but very few of his friends—disease of the heart; that the best doctors in London had bidden him avoid all excitement, but the great event of the day had proved too much for him; and now the last medical dictum was sudden failure of the heart's action, otherwise syncope or fainting. "Thank goodness it did not happen sooner," added kind Uncle Grimshaw, with an eye to the settlements.

Gentle Dr. Brendon urged upon her the usual commonplaces—about the mysterious dispensations of Providence; the death of a good man fully prepared for it; not to grieve, all was for the best; we could not be wiser than Heaven, and so forth. All the while Clochette drenched her unbound hair with *eau-de-cologne*.

By the next day all traces of the wedding feast had disappeared; but the house was besieged by callers, and cards in heaps, from persons unknown to Melanie Talbot, were left for "Lady Bray-

brooke," inscribed "with deepest condolence"—for she was deemed a disconsolate widow, abandoned to weeping and sobbing, despair and dishevelment.

For a time Melanie was languid and listless, like one who had outlived emotion; but she was only dull and dazed, with a strange sense that all her future life had been on the point of slipping out of her own hands, that she had parted with individuality and with individual action at the altar; and now all was reversed.

She had no love to give, but she felt intense pity and gratitude when she thought of the generous dead. These emotions, with something of compunction now, mingled with her genuine sorrow, for poor old Sir Brisco had been ever kind to Reggie and to Dick. If it was all for her sake, nevertheless, his kindness had been shown.

The circumstances of the baronet's death rendered an inquest unavoidable; but the concurrent testimony of his London medical advisers, of Mr. Grimshaw, and of Dr. Brendon, who had known him for years, rendered that painful and antiquated ceremony the work of an afternoon.

Days passed on now as usual, but Melanie had still a curious sense of unreality—of having awakened from a dream, or still being in one, from which she might awake to find, perhaps, that what seemed the event of the day happened weeks ago. She was young, and it was impossible for her not to think that among the hidden possibilities of the years to come something of grace, of tenderness and tranquillity, might await her.

"After all, you are married," said Uncle Grimshaw. "When a woman is so her destiny is accomplished, if the settlements are all right, as in this case they fortunately are. So what does the rest signify?"

And he gave one of his old chuckles as he spoke.

The title and estates went to a remote branch of the Braybrookes. Among other bequests in his will, Sir Brisco left a good round sum to his nephew, Horace Musgrave, and his wife, Amy Brendon. Melanie had the Dower House to reside in when she chose, and was left in ease and luxury, which, however, would be considerably curtailed if she married again; but now, free from the

tyranny, the meanness, and the daily degradation of Mr. Grimshaw's household and her aunt's imperious interference, the perpetual irritation of her former life had given place to a sense of independence, safety, and tranquillity that, but for the memory of Lonsdale, would have been very delightful; and her first thought on awaking each morning was that she was now her own mistress, and could never more be taunted that her daily food was the price of submission and obedience.

After that time of excitement how the days seemed to linger with Melanie—days alike slow and swift, for they were full of aimless and dreary emptiness, and passed without mark, though every hour was one of suppressed thought and gloom.

Neither Uncle Grimshaw nor Mrs. Chillington said a word of what the newspapers contained on that eventful morning of the marriage; and Melanie still secluded herself so much that not even Dr. Brendon, and one or two others who knew the story of her engagement to Lonsdale, felt themselves at liberty yet to enlighten her on the subject of his safety at Rangoon.

Was she to wear a widow's odious cap? was one of the first important subjects broached by Mrs. Chillington.

It was, under all the circumstances, deemed unnecessary, eventually; and she appeared in the deepest mourning Regent Street could furnish, without that obnoxious head-dress to conceal her beautiful brown hair; but her attire, like her black-edged letter paper, bore the impress of that "unutterable woe," which is essentially a badge of English grief, and is essentially absurd or grotesque. The routine of life began to go on, but not as before; for Melanie was too young and too full of life, for her youth, crushed though it had been by many adverse elements, not to revive within her.

To the monotony into which she was sinking, a startling fillip was given one day when her brother Dick, with Bingo barking at his heels, came rushing into the room, brandishing a newspaper, and shouting:

"Oh! Melanie—Melanie! Thank God! Thank God! Hurrah—hurrah! Lonsdale is not dead at all. Why, he landed at Portsmouth yesterday,

with ever so many sick soldiers from Burmah, for Netley. Read for yourself."

It was some minutes before she could do so, and a longer time elapsed before she could realise it all and know everything that had been so artfully concealed from her on her marriage morning by Uncle Grimshaw; and that knowledge did not raise him higher in her estimation.

The whole episode showed the deep cunning and cruelty of which he was capable.

"Alive and well—alive and well," she whispered to herself. It seemed incredible, after the details—meagre though they were—which she had read, so long ago, it seemed now, after all her sorrow and tears. "Well—and in England, too! Oh, what must he think of me when he hears all, from other lips, at first? The truth, the entire bitter truth, he may never, never know!"

She laid her head upon the mantel-board, as if too much thought oppressed her, and rested her cheek upon the dark velvet fringe with which its pallor contrasted; and thus she remained for a long time, gazing into the fire as though she could

find a clue to the future amid the ever-changing and red-glowing embers, the light of which played upon her sad sweet face.

Days passed on, and save what the newspaper reported, she heard no more of Lonsdale. But she knew that he was now in England, and within reach of all that skill, care, and science could do for him.

To rouse Melanie, and for the furtherance of some more ambitious schemes of her own, Mrs. Chillington, who had become effusively and elaborately affectionate, left her stately residence in the environs and took handsome rooms in Piccadilly, opposite the Green Park, whither she prevailed upon Melanie to accompany her; and after a time contrived to absorb her in a whirl of flower shows, luncheon and dinner parties, theatre-going, dresses and flying visits to all whom she cared to know; and under this system, which was new to her, Melanie's spirits certainly rose.

"I thought you would like this, dear," said the gay little widow. "There is no quietude so soothing that it does not become utter boredom at last."

"God alone knows what a day may bring forth—

for good or for evil," was the silent response of Melanie in her heart, in which, with pique and bitter disappointment, a misty kind of hope and fear grew side by side.

"Why does Montague make no sign or seek to find me out, after all that has happened to us both, to me, perhaps, especially, of late? I cannot take the initiative and write to him. Time may have some solution for this," she pondered, "hidden in the future."

But the solution, if it ever came, might come too late.

Among other visitors of Mrs. Chillington's there came almost daily, full of attention and devotion to Lady Braybrooke, a certain—not very—noble peer, of whom we shall hear more anon.

Mrs. Chillington's ambition was kindled anew by her recent success with the deceased baronet; and she now hoped that Melanie would crown all by marrying—"forming an alliance"—with some peer; and here was Colonel Viscount D'Oyley just to hand, needy, but ignorant as yet of how the young widow's settlements stood.

"With her magnificent jointure, Gideon," said Mrs. Chillington to Mr. Grimshaw, "and still more especially with her new position, her youth and beauty, too, why should she not look far beyond being a mere baronet's widow? Lord D'Oyley, whom perhaps you may remember, major of the King's Dragoon Guards, has now come into his uncle's title and estates. He is just home from Bengal, a K.C.M.G. and C.S.I., and seems greatly smitten with her."

Uncle Grimshaw gave a snorting assent. K.D.G. men seldom came near Birchin Lane, and he cared nothing about them. Having now got the whole three off his hands—Melanie and her two brothers—he did not care much about this new scheme; but was loth to offend Mrs. Chillington or appear indifferent to her ambitious views.

"Lady Braybrooke—what a mockery!" was ever Melanie's secret thought. And now, how to make Montague Lonsdale understand more fully the cruel pressure that had been put upon her—the effect of the false rumour of his death—and that she had never forgotten and never deceived him.

CHAPTER LXII.

GOSSIP.

"You here, Lonsdale, after all?"

"Hallo — Bilke? Val Bilke, of the King's Dragoon Guards?"

"The same, my boy. Glad to see you alive and well, old man," was the somewhat paradoxical response, as Lonsdale found his hand shaken by that gallant officer in the smoking-room of the Naval and Military Club.

Not that Lonsdale had ever much affected the society of the *blasé* and, sooth to say, somewhat bloated and "beery" looking cavalry man, but his face was a familiar one, and amid the ever-changing society of the club was one of the few he now knew. The gay Val was so bibulous that he always looked, as his mess said, "like a fellow half-sprung, or on half-cock."

"So you escaped those nigger fellows in the land of the white elephant?" said Bilke, proffering his handsome silver cigar-case. "Try one of my favourite brand."

"Thanks—yes, I gave them the slip."

"And have come home invalided with sick. That is like the blind leading the blind, as Byron says," said Bilke, whose knowledge of literature was somewhat hazy; "but I did not expect you to turn up here, looking so well and jolly, after being killed and buried by Dacoits."

"Jolly? Well, I cannot say that I quite feel so. Fever at Rangoon nearly finished me," replied Lonsdale. "I have come home to find health, though I cannot say I have much to live for now—so many old friends are gone, and I care not to cultivate new."

"Oh, d—n it, don't begin to moralise, old man," said Bilke, burying his somewhat purple nose in a beaker of brandy and seltzer. "I have often thought that it is wonderful what a man can go through—marching, fighting, disease, and drink—get over them all, and go on living as before, egad, and never seem to get old."

Lonsdale, not thinking this remark merited a reply, smoked on in silence; so Val Bilke twirled his carefully-waxed and dyed moustache and said:

"You remember D'Oyley, of Ours—Bob D'Oyley. He has succeeded to his title, and is now in the Upper House; though he won't be much use there, I fancy."

"What of him?" asked Lonsdale, with ill-concealed indifference.

"A gay old bird. He is dropping into a good thing."

"His title, you mean, or the estates?"

"Better than either, the estates, perhaps, particularly."

"In what way?"

"A charming widow—one scarcely a wife, they say; but widows were always Bob's pet weakness. You remember that pretty little one who was at grass in Calcutta till her calamity turned up, to the astonishment of us all. Then Bob's sensible admiration for married women has always been the saving of him. But the grass widow of Calcutta—Lady What's-her-name's supposed companion, whose husband, an infantry man, was killed in Burmah,

you know," continued Bilke, ending what he meant to say by putting his nose again in his sparkling beaker and becoming a little involved under the gaze of Lonsdale, who resented this public reference to the story of Montressor and his wife, poor little Claire.

"You don't mean to say that the colonel is dangling after her again—here in London?" he asked.

"Not at all, not at all; he is flying at higher game. I really think he means to become respectable and settle down quietly at last. They say it is quite a case between him and the young beauty, Lady Braybrooke."

"What did you say—who?"

"Lady Braybrooke, by Jove."

This rejoinder effectually silenced Lonsdale. What was really meant or inferred, what had transpired within so short a space, or what was now transpiring, he knew not; but while he silently resented the mention of Melanie's name in this blunt and off-hand way in such a public place, and its being coarsely coupled with that of such a man as Lord D'Oyley, he was unable to show any vital interest in the matter or ask any

information about it. However, amid the banter of a few vacant fellows, who were intrenched behind their journals on lounges or in easy chairs, he gleaned that the sudden widowhood of Melanie on her wedding-morning, together with her beauty and reputed wealth and sudden appearance in public places, under the chaperonage of Mrs. Chillington, had made her a kind of nine-days' wonder even in London; and that D'Oyley, an old friend—some said whilom admirer—of her aunt, was in such close attendance—"on daily dooty, don't you know, and all that sort of thing"—that it must eventually lead up to something of the kind towards Melanie, and in due course matrimony.

On landing at Portsmouth, Lonsdale had heard early of the baronet's sudden demise; but he had also heard of his marriage, as a fact, before it—an unpleasant fact for him to swallow; one which seemed somehow to separate him rudely and suddenly from Melanie, and made him feel as if the new ties cancelled all the old between them. All the more now did this seem when in this accursed club gossip her name was "muddled up" with that

of such an utter *vaurien* as D'Oyley, of the King's Dragoon Guards. And lest he might hear more that was equally galling, unpleasant, and unpalatable, he retired and sought the solitude of his own rooms.

His return to London had summoned back keenly all the fond, the sweet and tender memories, that were beginning, even with him, to lose their first acuteness and sharpness now.

Time, travel, war, excitement, and changes of scene, in no way connected with Melanie, had intervened, but they could not blunt the edge of his first grief and stern mortification when he read that fatal paragraph at Rangoon, and knew thereby that he had lost her. And now that she was again free, this new and unpleasant rumour was on the *tapis*.

His first thought was that he would get out of London and go to the Continent, to Paris, to Monaco, or anywhere—where, he cared not—to spend his leave of absence and avoid her. His best friends knew not what to make of his abstracted ways and restless glances, his long reveries, during which he would sit silent or appear to peruse a paper which was upside down,

while his cigar or briar-root went out, as he forgot even to smoke; even that had failed to soothe him.

London seemed intolerable to him now, with its everlasting streets and monotonous rows of brick houses, and the muddy river of unnumbered murders and suicides flowing turgidly through it; for all unlike "the prettee towne by Tamesis' side" of which old Leland wrote, is now the bloated and unpicturesque Babylon that grasping centralisation has created.

It was past the season of fogs, however—that season when, as Byron describes it, the London sun shines

> Through a misty morning twinkling weak as
> A drunken man's dead eye in maudlin sorrow.

But it was the breathless time of summer now, when London has no more atmosphere than we may find in the Red Sea when steaming with the wind astern.

For a time Lonsdale remained full of his own dreamy thoughts, gazing listlessly beyond the everlasting current of vehicles and wayfarers in Piccadilly into the pleasant Green Park, where all

the foliage was powdered with summer dust—that stately park from which greedy old George III. "cribbed" so much to add to his gardens at Buckingham Palace, the scene of Beau Fielding's famous duel in 1696, and that of Ligonier with Alpieri seventy-five years after; and so, after long cogitation with himself, he was still in the mood to turn his back upon London and relinquish all chance of meeting with Melanie. But days passed on and found him still lingering at the Naval and Military Club, not far from the rooms temporarily occupied by Mrs. Chillington and her niece.

Being greatly frequented by Aldershot men, who run up to town for a day or two's leave, the club, though a retired place, was ever gay enough.

Strange to say, it was in ancient times a venerable inn, "by the way that led to Reading," when Knightsbridge was a pretty hamlet and highwaymen haunted Hounslow. In more modern years it was an abode of Lord Palmerston; and it has yet a noble aspect, while the courtyard in front gives an air of retirement.

Lonsdale had seen in an old paper the paragraph announcing his capture and death at the hands of

Dacoits near Ava; and this accounted in some fashion for her apparent treachery to himself in the marriage with Sir Brisco.

Stung to the soul by all he had heard, and still more by all he imagined, Lonsdale, unwisely perhaps, allowed some time to elapse before he could make up his mind what to do; and this delay was somewhat fatal to his cause.

At last he thought—

"Why not call on Mrs. Chillington at her apartments—I was a guest of hers at The Park when in town before? Of course."

It was only the polite thing to do so, and leave his card if no one was at home. Accordingly, on the very afternoon this idea occurred to him, he quitted the club and turned westward down Piccadilly, with but one thought now.

He was to see Melanie again.

He had acted, he feared, foolishly, timidly, suspiciously. How would she receive him? What would she do—what say?

"She loved me once; she cannot but love me still," he whispered to himself as he went on.

CHAPTER LXIII.

IN PICCADILLY.

It was early in the second month of the London season. The afternoon was beautiful; but as usual in London, there came no breeze to replace the heat of the breathless mid-day; yet the Park and the Row were crowded. All the world of fashion, wealth, and idleness was there, riding, driving, sauntering about, or occupying the long lines of seats near Hyde Park Corner.

At the lofty door of Mrs. Chillington's residence in Piccadilly a handsome and well-appointed open carriage was standing, as Lonsdale drew near, on the opposite side of the way, by the pavement that borders the northern side of the Green Park. He perceived in an instant that its occupants were Melanie, her friend Amy Musgrave, and Lord D'Oyley, evidently bent for the Row; and the

carriage, he also saw, was not that of Mrs. Chillington, with its pretentious coats-armorial, but was Melanie's, for on the panels was a widow's lozenge, small and modest, charged with the Braybrooke arms, and the liveries were yellow and black.

The two seemed in excellent spirits, and the carriage bowled away west, towards Apsley House.

That Amy should seem joyous and full of vivacity with "town," and all the happiness and change it brought her, was natural. A lively girl, she was always ready for anything; so why not for "a bit of park" with this "old fossil, who was weak on Melanie—or was it on Mrs. Chillington?" Amy cared little if it were so.

Melanie's smiles and good spirits jarred upon Lonsdale; but she had happiness in one great measure now. In charge of old Bethia Barlow, at the Dower House, Reggie was well cared for, thanks to her own sacrifice, and Dick's aspirations after Sandhurst would soon be crowned with success. They were all independent of Uncle Grimshaw, whose hopes of the flesh-pots of Ravensbourne Hall had faded away, and he could only growl and glare

at his frugal meals, while he increased his allowance of cheap port and brandy and water.

The Viscount was now partially bald; but his hair, whether a triumph of art or nature, was still a rich dark brown, while his burly moustachios were of the same hue, but carefully waxed out at the tips. He was well-preserved, well-padded, and splendidly made up by his tailor, and was intensely vain of having his name coupled with that of Melanie, who was totally ignorant of his real character. That those two country girls should be in such "shady" society as that of his lordship, Lonsdale never doubted to be the result of Mrs. Chillington's influence or plans, and their ignorance of the infamous world of London; and the rough gossip of Captain Bilke and others at the club came painfully to his memory as he crossed the street and handed two cards to a tall, powdered valet--a tall, powdered, overfed and *insouciant* lout—who was lounging against a pillar and looking down contemptuously on the world at large.

"Mrs. Chillington was—he believed—at 'ome;

but Lady Braybrooke was hout"; so the visitor was ushered in.

In the elegant double drawing-room of the Piccadilly mansion—a species of apartment to which Lonsdale, for long past, had been a stranger—he glanced about him for some traces of Melanie's presence, nor were they wanting.

There was a water-colour sketch of a scene on the Thames—how well he knew the features of that locality! The willows and the elms drooping over the shining water whereon the great white lilies floated—the place where they had so often met and last parted, with all its associations. On the piano lay scattered several pieces of music, some by Chopin, and, among others, "The Waltz of the King's Dragoon Guards," all inscribed to Lady Braybrooke, with "the kindest wishes of Lord D'Oyley; so "this kind of thing" had been going on for some time past.

Half-cut novels and serials lay about; they were not much in the peer's line; but a cabinet photo of the latter, in a heavily-frogged coat, with all his medals and orders displayed, occupied a place of

honour on a side table, on a pretty little gilded easel, which, however, might have been Mrs. Chillington's arrangement. Yet Lonsdale eyed it darkly as if it had been a Dacoit by the Rangoon River.

Near it in a Dresden china vase was a bouquet of small red roses. Lonsdale remembered that just such a rose as one of them was in D'Oyley's button hole as he drove off, and though it might have been the gift of Mrs. Chillington, "trifles light as air" haunted the lover's mind, and were rather in the ascendant just then.

It chanced that a little before this time, for support of the Ministry or some particular members thereof, on the retirement of that incapable body a huge batch of "creations" had, as usual, taken place; and among the latter now figured Sir Plantagenet de Pugwash, Knt., of Stokencross—for "his eminent services to the State"; in boiling up soap in unusual quantities, we presume.

The blushing honours of the old soap boiler of Battersea had filled Mrs. Chillington with a general contempt for all bearers of knighthood that was not hereditary.

"Pooh!" she had said; "what are baronets now?"

Thus she aimed at higher game for Melanie.

With Lonsdale's cards in her hand, she now lingered for a moment at the rich Indian *portière* which hung before the inner drawing-room door, and while unseen by him, a very cloudy and hostile expression indeed hovered on her certainly fine old face.

She half crushed the cards in her angry little hand, as she felt herself positively ill-used by Fate.

It was too bad to think that, after all, after deeming him safely dead and buried, or eaten—she cared little which—by the Burmese, he should return thus, looking as well and handsome as ever, to mar, perhaps, her second ambitious plans and hopes of being aunt to a peeress; and so, in her heart, she hated poor Lonsdale with a most unholy bitterness.

Yet nothing could equal the sweetness and brightness of her smile as she came tripping forward and said, with both her hands held out:

"Welcome, Captain Lonsdale—or are you Major now?—I do hope so. To see a man fresh from

the seat of war—especially one who has seen and escaped so much as you—is indeed an excitement in these prosaic days of ours.

He bowed over the old hypocrite's hand, and took a gilt chair she indicated.

"The story of your being killed was most painfully tragic," she resumed; "but untrue, thank Heaven! Nothing tragic happens now-a-days, eh, Captain—er—Lonsdale?"

How difficult it was, from her manner, to imagine what was really passing in her snaky old heart, while Mademoiselle Clochette arranged her foot-stool and the tripod table, on which were placed her fan, scent bottles, her knitting, and pet cur in a mother-of-pearl basket, and then withdrew to plunge into her raciest Zola.

Indeed, no one who looked on Mrs. Chillington and saw the suave expression on her lineless old face, her features delicate and regular, her sweet company smile and careful costume, with the graceful cap of richest lace upon the coils of her snow-white hair, could have deemed what a hard-hearted woman of the world she was.

"And Lady Braybrooke is well, I hope?" said Lonsdale, as if in a casual way.

"O yes, thanks, wonderfully so, under the circumstances. Ah, hers was a tragic story, if you choose; poor dear Sir Brisco! You have heard all about his sudden death, of course—a sad fate—a dreadful shock to us all, dear Captain Lonsdale. But I hope—nay, I am certain," she added, with a waggish little smile, "that my niece has got over it all now. And the ruby mines, Captain Lonsdale," she resumed, after a little pause, "I long so much to hear about them. Don't you wish that you had gone with the troops to the ruby mines?"

"They were scarcely thought of when we were before Ava," replied Lonsdale, coldly, for her manner irritated him.

"Ah, indeed! Then you have been in town for some time?"

"A little over a fortnight since I landed at Portsmouth."

"At your club?"

"Yes."

"Good," thought Mrs. Chillington. "As the club his cards show is only a few doors off, a fortnight without making any move to see Melanie infers that a change has come over the spirit of his dream."

And this thought gave her such intense satisfaction that her smile became radiant indeed.

"I thought Lady Braybrooke looked pale," said he, after an awkward pause.

"You have seen her?"

"Only driving along the street a few minutes ago."

"Ah," said Mrs. Chillington, greatly relieved; "London in summer is scarcely the place for rose-coloured complexions, I fear. It is becoming a dreadfully overgrown place, and though delightful, who is it that says, if we take out of London everyone and everything that is not English little will be left behind?"

"You will, I trust, give Lady Braybrooke my kindest regards—my best wishes," said Lonsdale, oblivious of her remark, and with a break in his voice.

Mrs. Chillington was not slow to remark the latter. She made an impatient gesture, with a small and still very beautiful hand, and thought it would be as well to crush out any "nonsense" that might yet be lingering in the memory of this tiresome lover.

"Your best wishes, as an old friend, dear Captain Lonsdale—you have heard then. I shall of course," said she, and added in a confidential manner, and with her sweetest smile, "Her peculiar position, her strange story, and her great attractions have made her an object of deep interest to many in her new circle; but perhaps to none more than her present escort, Lord D'Oyley, who is of a very romantic nature."

"Romantic!" thought Lonsdale, almost laughing in the old woman's face, while thinking her remark to him was in execrable taste—knowing all she did and all she so cruelly ignored—the present and the past relations of himself and Melanie. Certainly he had never spoken with her on that subject; thus, perhaps, with all her *aplomb* and perfect self-possession, she felt that she was

at liberty to talk of Lord D'Oyley with an ease that was cuttingly cruel and suavely malicious.

Irritated almost beyond good breeding by the style she adopted, and the tenor of such hints as she would have made to no other man, he felt that he had a right to say something in the way of protestation; and she knew and felt it too, while inclined to ignore any right or interest he had in Melanie or her movements. Thus he began, with a smile and manner as suave as her own.

"But are you aware, Mrs. Chillington, that Lord D'Oyley is a man whose antecedents—"

"Oh, I know all you would urge, as a friend, Captain Lonsdale," said she, with smiling precipitation; "but, believe me, his lordship is better than many other men, and certainly, I believe, not worse. Every woman of the world knows what your sex is generally."

Lonsdale's face wore an expression of dissent and disgust mingled; but he held his peace. Could it be possible that from underhand influences such as these, Melanie, so pure, so good, and simple, could tolerate a man with a reputation so unsavoury

as that of D'Oyley, whose name was a by-word from the Curragh to Chowringher. Of course she could know nothing about it, or if she did, there must have come to pass mysteriously some lamentable deterioration on her part, and in her views of men!

Fearing to hear more, and loathing what he had heard, Lonsdale, after a *mauvais quart d'heure*, rose to retire, and his hostess rose too, a hint that their interview was over, as she rang the bell.

"To-morrow is the day of the great Botanic *fête*," said she, bowing and smiling; "you will be there, of course, Captain Lonsdale—all the world will be: oh—good morning."

"Good morning."

"Heaven aid me to keep these two fools apart for ever!" was the old lady's prayer. She said nothing of Lonsdale's call to Melanie when she returned from the Row, and took care to destroy his cards; thus, as days had already passed, Melanie began to feel more than ever justly piqued.

Lonsdale gladly quitted the oppressive atmosphere of Mrs. Chillington's residence, and found

himself once more alone in the sunshine of Piccadilly; but he knew that Melanie was alone with "that man," and in the face of Society, and looking the while so provokingly bright, smiling, and happy. Was this the result of her "new circle," as her aunt called it—the new life she was leading?

It might be so.

"If this abominable old woman is to be our evil genius again!" thought Lonsdale, as he walked sharply onward, "it cannot be Melanie's fault, or, if so, Pope was right:—

Woman's at best a contradiction still!

Well, well, if so, hey for India again! Mother Chillington spoke of the Botanic *fête*, casually. No doubt she will be there, and Melanie too. So shall I!"

With all her mock effusiveness, the aunt had evinced no desire that he should repeat his visit; but Lonsdale cared little for that omission. He knew well the dame of old.

CHAPTER LXIV.

THE BOTANIC FÊTE.

"HAWKSLEY, a hansom cab!" cried Lonsdale.

"All right, sir," replied Dick's friend, the sergeant, who had now quitted the R.W.F.L.W.O. Regiment to become a *commissionaire* at the club; while we may add that Corporal Albert Edward Gutters had, for certain malpractices of his own, been relegated for a considerable term to the breezy locality of Dartmoor.

In a very mingled mood, or in many moods rather, Lonsdale was conveyed swiftly up Bond Street, through the network of narrow and shabby thoroughfares that lie beyond it, to the outer circle; and thence to the Royal Botanic Gardens, where a scene was presented of which old Marnock, the designer of them, could not have dreamed.

The season was summer. The soft warm air

was apt to fill one with dreams and sensations of pleasure, when a blue sunny haze partly obscured the distant landscape, the haze of heat and moisture, though violets yet lingered in the shadier woods; but the time we refer to now was night.

June is pre-eminently the month for those privileged follies called flower-shows, when the woods begin to wear a uniform tint of greenery. But the flowers, in all their beauty, were secondary to the wonderful effects of the *fête* at the Botanic, which presented a *coup d'œil* unthought of, we say, by the worthy Robert Marnock—a North Tweeder, we presume—as the midnight junkettings, amid myriads of Chinese lanterns, Roman candles, and coloured fires, in his old nursery-grounds; while the beauty and fashion of London gathered there in thousands, to promenade, to flirt, and listen to the music discoursed by the bands of the Blues and Life Guards; and smiles and loveliness, and much real or incipient love-making abounds on every side; the latter more than all in the quiet nooks and shady places offered and afforded by the mode in which these gardens are laid out.

So skilfully has this been done that the spectator, standing on any spot or eminence, cannot possibly guess how far the grounds extend, for the ring of land has become to the eye an epitome of a boundless and varied expanse of open scenery.

If in the clear sunshine of day this is the optical result, how much more must it seem so by night, when, added to all the skilful effects of artificial lights and coloured fires, the beautiful conservatory becomes a temple of frosted silver, and the long rhododendron marquees turn to flowering valleys that seem the abode of fairies.

At the sudden explosion of a maroon or signal light at ten p.m., the grounds became flooded with coloured fires that brought out the foliage and peculiarities of plants and trees, from the lowly weeping willow to the tall and stately elm, while the bands of the Household Troops, by the National Anthem, proclaimed that Royalty had come. But it was neither to see the latter nor watch scenic effects that Montague Lonsdale sought that brilliant *fête*. He came to seek but one sweet face that had haunted him for months and months in places far

away beyond the sea ; and among all the thousands of lovely girls around him he saw nothing of it yet.

The utter solitude of being alone in a vast and changing crowd, composed of groups and parties of mutual friends, began to oppress him after a time, and he was on the point of turning irresolutely away, when a familiar voice said :

"You here, Captain Lonsdale ? Montague—what a delightful surprise ! "

Then he suddenly found himself confronted by the bright, smiling face, and the languishing hazel eyes of the coquettish Mrs. Musgrave, *neé* Hilda Tremayne, who was promenading with Mrs. Chillington and a gentleman. The latter bowed, and moved on a little way, when she at once joined Lonsdale.

" This is fortunate," she resumed, beaming upon him ; " I am so longing for special Indian news. Did you see papa before you left for Europe ? Are you direct from Calcutta ? "

" No—Burmah."

" Of course ! You must tell me all about the war—it seems an age since we parted at Suez ! " continued the effusive Hilda, as she took Lonsdale's

arm, and looked up into his eyes with the old smile, which he knew so well, and many others too; but it was a light and winning one, nevertheless. "And now tell me, you have seen Melanie—Lady Braybrooke, of course?"

"Is she here?" he asked, evasively.

"Oh, yes—every one is. She is here with her new (perhaps I should say old) admirer. Your old flame—you laugh at the idea now, no doubt—is one of the sensations of the season; but she will not long ornament the rooms of the politic aunt, if rumours prove true."

To all this prattle Lonsdale made no reply. He knew Hilda of old, and how capable she was of exercising all her powers of mischief and fascination, married though she was. Thinking of this, he enquired for Mr. Musgrave, fearing he was forgotten, "in the way of the half-conscienced world in which they lived."

"Oh, he is well, thanks, and at Brighton, fortunately," she added in a low voice, with one of her old *œillades* shot from her white-lidded eyes; "but the other Horace's little Amy is here, I

believe ; and—do you know—she is most amazingly in love with her own husband ; though it is said that people now-a-days never do marry the right people. What funny old air is that which the Coldstream band is playing?" she asked, after a brief pause.

"'Love not.'"

"Ah, very sensible title too."

"How?"

"Because 'the thing you love may change.' Does not the song say so?" replied Hilda, with one of her silly but certainly silvery laughs; while Lonsdale gave a species of start, as he saw, among many others, the familiar face he had been in search of pass close by where he and his companion stood, half-hidden under the long branches of a drooping willow, near the artificial lake in which the coloured lights were brilliantly reflected.

It was the face of Melanie — that soft, yet striking face ; so full of sweetness and power, tenderness and strength, strangely blended—the face he had last seen blistered with tears at their parting place—last, but once, when yesterday she was with the same man who was in attendance on her now.

As she passed slowly with D'Oyley, he heard her voice. It was only uttering some commonplaces; but how it thrilled through him as it fell on his sensitive ear. "There are women," says a writer, "to whom one can shut one's eyes and listen for the sheer pleasure of sound, half inclined to laugh with the pleasure, without even heeding what they may say, as one listens to the conversation of a pious and sympathetic voice."

Such a voice was Melanie's, and Lonsdale had ever felt it to be so; but never so much as when, after a lapse of anxious and harassing time, he heard it uttering words that were of little import, and were not addressed to him.

She did not see him; but D'Oyley, ignorant of any part or tie between them, did, and gave him a friendly and self-satisfied nod as he and she moved on with the passing crowd of promenaders.

Bob D'Oyley, as he was always called in the K.D. Guards, had been handsome when young; but dissipation, good living, and hard drinking had sorely marred all that. There was a good deal of self-consciousness, and perfect *aplomb*, of course,

about him ; and every detail of his dress, from his white cravat and pin to his tight glazed boots, was perfect, a study.

His features were small cut, but heavy now; his aquiline nose had become thick and crimson tinted: his eyes watery and leery, while his bearing was jaunty, and his whole air that of a man who was resolved to be still young, and who, though well-saved in some respects, had lived a faster life than was good for him.

"You know Lord D'Oyley?" said Hilda, with a little surprise.

"Yes, met him in Calcutta," replied Lonsdale, curtly.

"He is so delightfully wicked!" laughed Hilda, who took in the whole situation and enjoyed it exceedingly; "you were watching them, I saw."

Lonsdale made no reply to this unpleasant speech.

"Don't they seem a handsome couple?" asked the merciless Hilda, who neither forgot nor forgave Lonsdale's indifference to herself, particularly amid the many opportunities afforded in the Pagoda to Suez.

"Only one is very much older than the other," said he, coldly.

"Ah, but Melanie Talbot is an odd girl—she always rather affected elderlies. But Mrs. Chillington says she will make him a most suitable and charming wife."

"Wife! Has he proposed—are they engaged?"

"Don't you know? Oh, Montague, of course not, you have been so long in Burmah and have not heard what her own circle says; but you will soon know all about it. Her allowance is to be cut down to less than a half if she marries again, I hear. The selfishness of the upper ten, even in dying, is really disgusting, Montague; is it not? If a baronet is one of that upper circle, which I don't think Mrs. Chillington admits, now that they have a higher rank in view."

And in this more than vague way she continued, with her sweetest smiles, to "stick pins and needles" into her unhappy listener.

"I would rather see Melanie dead than the wife of such a man," was the latter's thought.

"Hilda — Mrs. Musgrave," said he, with an

irritation he cared not to conceal now, "are you aware of all that your words infer to me?"

Under his angry eye her smile faded out.

"I only know," she replied falteringly, "that Lady Braybrooke's name is mixed up freely with that of Lord D'Oyley, under the influence, guidance, what you will, of her aunt, Mrs. Chillington."

"I can easily believe that."

"I know he has come down to the weakness of five o'clock teas at Piccadilly, and he seems to be able to command her society at will."

Hilda was piqued, indignant now, at being taken to task.

"And I ever thought her perfect," muttered Lonsdale to himself; yet Hilda heard, or guessed, the remark.

"Ah, this comes of raising so much upon ideality," she said. "In love we picture the object as perfection, yet have often in the end only the prosaic reality—disappointment and deception. Is it not so?" she added, while half-perceptibly pressing his arm with softly-gloved hand.

Once again Melanie and D'Oyley passed him in the same place unnoticed — in the same gay promenade—and it seemed horrible, unnatural.

One fact seemed unpleasantly plain. She had married Sir Brisco, and seemed ready enough, if all he heard was true, to marry again; and all this seemed, for the time being, to bear but one interpretation to him—that she was doubly false.

He might have followed, intercepted, and spoken with her, ending perhaps that *tête-à-tête* promenade; but Lonsdale's pride was alike roused and crushed, if we may use a paradox. He felt choking. He resolved to quit the *fête* and return to his rooms; and he did so, ignorant that the Viscount had casually mentioned his name to Melanie as that of a brother officer, whom he had last met in Calcutta, and had just seen now.

"Seen?" thought the girl; "so we have actually been in the same place—almost together—yet never met! Oh, Amy, is it not horrid!" she exclaimed to her friend; "why was I not told sooner?".

"He was too well engaged under the willows

with Hilda Tremayne—Musgrave, I mean," said Mrs. Chillington, maliciously if not coarsely, and she left nothing unsaid or unhinted to make it appear that the laggard Lonsdale and the coquettish Hilda were engaged in one of those petty *affaires du cœur*, for which the latter had become so celebrated, as one of the most dangerous of married flirts, as she had also bloomed into the dubious honour of being a fashionable beauty; and Lonsdale could not know that Melanie, after quitting the Botanic *fête*, had also gone home to Piccadilly, disappointed, disgusted, and grieved to the soul.

"Was it for all this sort of thing," thought Lonsdale, "that every hour I was away from her, and thousands of miles of ocean rolled between us, I seemed to be eating my heart out, and she was my first thought in the morning and the last at night? That I had nerve given me to endure and face all I faced and endured among those d——d Dacoits and savage Burmese? That I was spared to outlive the deadly fever of the Rangoon River, and yet come home, from the

land where so many better fellows have left their bones? Surely not—surely not!"

But his melodramatic thoughts and half-uttered speeches failed to soothe him. His heart was burning with a great bitterness and anger. In this mood, resolving at once to start for the Continent to spend the time, till he could, *viâ* Brindisi and Suez, return to the Regiment, he wrote that night to the Adjutant-General for the usual leave to travel abroad, that he might put the "silver streak" between himself and his unforeseen troubles.

And as he and that *blasé* dragoon, Val Bilke, had a little supper of devilled plover's eggs and slightly iced champagne, the latter, who saw he was cut up about something, said, quoting some book, though he read little, certainly:

"Don't be down on your luck about a bill or a girl, if possible. I would advise you avoid misanthropy. Amuse yourself with your fellow creatures, make friends of them, make use of them, make all you can out of them, but don't always impute bad motives to them. Our motives are like ourselves, a mixture. That is my advice to you, old fellow."

CHAPTER LXV.

AMY'S LETTER.

Strange indeed had felt Melanie's first experience of her new and independent existence at the Dower House, with all its comparative luxuries and perfect freedom from the sway of Uncle Grimshaw, with his petty tyrannies, sneers, and crotchets.

She had felt herself a woman for the first time. Her surroundings, duties, motives, and position partly bewildered the girl; though she had an uncomfortable sense that she deserved them not, and should relinquish them; but why, or for what? Had she not, as Reggie often said, dearly won it all?

And he and his brother were safe now, under her own wing, and free from the horrors of orphanage and dependence.

She had grown stronger, braver, more courageous, since she had become so completely her own mistress, and free from all the strain and pressure put upon her.

Lonsdale was safe and at home, there was no

doubting that; yet days and weeks, that seemed likely to run to months, had passed since she came to Piccadilly, and he had made no sign to her of his presence in England; and Mrs. Chillington had carefully concealed the circumstance of his visit, and the false impressions she had given him on that occasion.

Ignorant of all this, Melanie felt deeply wounded by the apparent cessation of his tender interest in her, on one hand, while Lord D'Oyley's continuous sympathy and endeavours to please, on the other —though frequently boredom—seemed always to occur at natural times; thus her instincts did not take alarm at them; besides he was so *passé*, though acting the young old man.

She suspected—could not help knowing—the ill-disguised intentions of her aunt; but was she to permit this scheming and ambitious old matron to mix up her name with that of a man who was totally indifferent to her, and whom she would soon learn to dislike?

Was her heart to be again trifled with—again trampled on? And a vista of future regrets and bitter memories opened up to her.

But why did Montague treat her so? There was a time when she could not imagine life passing without him; but now it seemed as if the coming years might have eventualities for her, in which he would bear no part.

Hilda had impressed upon her the fact, that he had been for a long, long space at his club, close by! Whenever came this strange and intangible barrier of doubt, or growing indifference between them? It seemed like an evil dream, and sorrow became blinded with her genuine emotion of pique, while in Lonsdale's mind were formless and purposeless thoughts of travelling beyond the seas again.

And now on the very forenoon after the Botanic *fête* there ensued between the aunt and niece a brief conversation that seemed, to the latter, as savouring of the old past at Rose Cottage.

"You do not look happy, Melanie," began Mrs. Chillington.

"Perhaps—but I am resolved to be happy, if I may; I had enough of being otherwise under Uncle Grimshaw's *régime*," replied Melanie, with more spirit or asperity than she was wont to display.

"What is it that brings this cloud over you? Lonsdale again, I suppose. Hilda told me that he saw you twice at the *fête*, but contented himself by doing so. Can you, my niece, be mean enough to—"

"Aunt, please to leave Captain Lonsdale's name out of this discussion."

"That's well. I shall gladly do so, my dear; all the more thankfully that you have so happily attracted—I may say infatuated—Lord D'Oyley."

"I am very sorry to hear it," replied Melanie, keeping her profile to the speaker.

"Sorry—why? You ought rather to be glad, when your old flame fails you, as he has so abominably done, darling," said Mrs. Chillington; and it was strange, with her silvery hair, silvery voice, and sweet smile, how cruel and false this old woman could be.

"I have had enough of these new schemes of yours, Aunt Chillington, and shall quit London by the night train for Oxford to-morrow."

"But you must not—cannot!"

"Must not and cannot—why?"

"You are almost pledged to be Lord D'Oyley's

wife, so far as publicity goes; and I know he is on the point of a proposal."

"This is worse and worse; absurd, outrageous!" exclaimed Melanie, with a scornful laugh, that was new indeed to her sweet lips. "I have been trepanned once; but never again—never again!"

She started from her seat as she spoke; and twisted her lace handkerchief as she would have twisted a cord.

"We shall see what we shall see, darling," laughed the old lady, and in spite of Melanie's pale anger and intense repugnance, she twined her arms around the girl's neck, and tenderly—or apparently so—kissed her on both eyes. "I have but to request you, Melanie, to consider well before you renew your marriage bonds," added the old hypocrite; "and only wed—as I know you will do—one who is worthy of you."

It was at this crisis that Mrs. Chillington received a letter from the Viscount, asking her good influence, and permission to address her niece who, though a widow, he deemed yet but a mere girl. He urged his deep regard for the latter

and the settlement he could make upon her, beyond all the late Sir Brisco had done. She was a girl, he added, who, he felt, was well calculated to shine in the best society; who would render his home and his table brilliant and attractive; who would soothe his declining years, he was rashly on the point of adding—not that they had begun to decline yet—no d— me! that was a long way off still, he thought; but he cast himself upon the amiability and goodness of Mrs. Chillington, and craved her best wishes in the matter of his suit.

She perused this letter with intense satisfaction, and though she made no mention of the subject to Melanie, wrote to the Viscount appointing a day and hour to call, when he would find her niece alone, and trust to himself, his own influence, position, and attractiveness for the rest; also reminding him that marriage, as a tie that lasted for life, ought not to be contracted without due care and just consideration. The same post brought a letter to the club for Lonsdale. It was from Amy Musgrave, the wife of his old friend, the Hussar.

Though inspired by a genuine spirit of friendship

and regard for Melanie and himself, Amy's letter was a very rambling one; yet she made Lonsdale fully aware of how the marriage with Sir Brisco had been brought so quickly about. "Fatherless, motherless, portionless, alone, and more than all, supposing you to be dead, dear Montague, what could you expect her to do? It was a delusion and a sacrifice!" wrote little Amy; "she is under some of the bad influences still, and your abstention from seeing her is cruel—more cruel than ever was her Uncle Grimshaw, who, I hope—as papa says—is now thinking of the needle's eye through which he must creep. You have committed a sad mistake in not seeing Melanie and ending all this painful turmoil at once; though I did see you cross Piccadilly some days ago, and thought you meant to call." ("So that visit has been concealed!" muttered Lonsdale—"the same old game is being still played.") "It is horrible to think that after all the past, and when you are so dear to each other, you should be residing but a few doors apart, yet never meet. Some mischief is being done, and nobody does so much of that as everybody. You are quite like the people in a three-volume novel! She would cut me

for ever and a day if she knew of this letter. Do not 'fear your fate too much,' but put it to the issue of a visit, dear Montague, or delay may be fatal. I am engaged to shop to-morrow, at three p.m., with Mrs. Chillington; and will contrive that Melanie shall be alone. Call then, or I shall never, never forgive you.

"P.S.—I will keep the old lady in Regent Street as long as I can."

His heart was full of tenderest gratitude to little Amy for her kindly and amiable intentions.

What should he do but go at the hour she indicated, when he loved Melanie so deeply, when both had been so consistently tried, yet faithful to the dream of love so long? But what did Amy mean by the phrase that delay might be fatal?

A well-padded and carefully attired personage, who sat opposite, deep in the columns of a society paper; who had a rich brown fringe of hair round his rather bald head, and who had his moustachios equally well dyed, but carefully waxed to their spiky tips, might have thrown some light upon that, as he had in his pocket an important reply from Mrs. Chillington.

CHAPTER LXVI.

"AND SO THE TALE IS TOLD."

Curiously enough they quitted the club together, and at the same time, that afternoon. Lord D'Oyley, for he it was, turned through the gate to the left, to visit first a shop in Bond Street, Lonsdale through that which led to the right, westward down Piccadilly; and a vast deal was involved by the small difference in time these two movements made.

On this occasion Lonsdale did not go through the empty pretence of asking for Mrs. Chillington, but for Lady Braybrooke at once, and the tall flunkey, who was lounging insouciantly against a pillar of the doorway, leisurely informed him, in the idiom of his county, that—

"Lady Bibwook wos at 'ome, but Missus Chillington wos out, taking of a hairing."

Preceding him in orthodox fashion, with his

card upon a salver, he ushered Lonsdale into the stately drawing-room, the windows of which overlooked the Green Park, and wherein Melanie was seated at the piano.

She was singing to herself, for she was alone, in her soft contralto voice, without strain or effort, as she never attempted anything unsuited to her soft and birdlike notes, for music was not Melanie's strong point, thus she never thought of attaining artificial perfection; and now, full of her own thoughts, she seemed neither to see the visitor's card nor hear his name announced, but played on in dreamy abstraction something that was very low and sad.

Then, as the valet withdrew, she suddenly paused and interlaced her slender fingers at the back of her head; and as she did so her sleeves fell back and displayed, to the dimpled elbows, her snow-white arms, so tapered and lovely in their grace and contour.

One great beauty she had pre-eminently—even Hilda always admitted it—her figure, which was simply perfect; and though by no means vain,

Melanie was sensible enough to have all her costumes made plain, tightly-fitting, and becoming to her.

For a second or two Lonsdale hovered near her unseen, and felt with truth that we seem at times to possess a kind of second self, and that "there is a sense of unreality mixed up with our lives, even at their greatest moments, which stands us in good stead at a crisis and carries us calm in all outward seeming, and sometimes even inwardly so, through trials and difficulties that seem impossible upon paper."

On every line of his handsome face there was usually written self-control; but now it wore a yearning expression, and a half-stifled exclamation escaped him. Melanie turned, and had not her mind been full of him, she must have uttered a cry.

"Lonsdale—Montague!"

Her voice was a breathless one; at a glance she knew him, despite the effects of recent suffering and severe illness, but stood for a moment quite still, voiceless, dumb, while a flood of pain and joy,

of memories bitter and sweet, seemed to sweep over her head.

"Melanie—at last, my darling—at last!" His arms caught her as she swayed about to fall, and drawing her face upon his breast, he covered it with kisses.

When she lifted it, it was colourless as one of the marble busts close by, for great emotions rendered her pale. She did not faint—far from it—but for a moment she seemed to see nothing of the stately, double drawing-room, with its silken hangings and florid decorations, and all seemed dark, blurred, confused, and she might have reeled had not Lonsdale's arms been round her; and as he kissed her hands, he did not fail to see that his engagement ring was still on the third finger of the left, half-hiding the wedding hoop of Sir Brisco.

"My own!" cried Lonsdale, as all the misery that hoop recalled came to memory. "My own, what a bitter bondage your short life has been, and how cruelly you have been made to suffer, through others and the force of circumstances; but it is all over, Melanie—all over, and past now!"

More than once he held her at arm's length, that he might contemplate her face, her eyes, her hair, and then there spread a light, fond flush over her cheek that made her strangely beautiful.

Tenderly he gazed down into her frank and soft upturned face, which met the eyes that she had seen in many a day dream, yet had never expected to see in this world again.

Just then their words of joy were rather incoherent, and their caresses, if sweet, certainly looked rather fatuous to a visitor, whose white, shrivelled hand drew back the silk portion of the doorway, but paused then, as he found himself not wanted, and most decidedly *de trop*, and a little too late!

Provided with a magnificent ring from Bond Street—a jewel, the acceptance of which he never doubted—the Viscount had come gingerly, but gaily, down Piccadilly. He had forgotten his card case, but was duly announced to ears that heard not his name, and by whom his existence was no more remembered than the last year's snow.

"The devil!" he muttered, as he softly withdrew. "If I am only of sufficient value in the

eyes of these women to be played with, the sooner I am off the better, by Jove!"

After a pause—

"Why have you been so unkind?" asked Melanie, in a broken voice, while a little colour swept over her face and neck.

"Unkind, Melanie?"

"Yes, if you knew all, why avoid me as you have done?"

"I had no choice, and ever strove to crush the wish to see you again."

"After all I have suffered?"

"After all I was told, rather."

"Of what—of me?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"Your Aunt Chillington—of an intended second marriage."

A little convulsive, yet almost angry, laugh escaped Melanie.

"Enough of that mischief—how can you speak of it?"

"Because it met me on every hand, Melanie."

How much they had to tell and to explain to each other! Of the intercepted letters; of the trickery of Mr. Grimshaw, and the use to which he put his fatal despatch-box; of the agonising newspaper rumours; of all he had undergone abroad, and all that she had suffered, but in a different manner, at home!

By degrees this was all unfolded and described again and again, brokenly, lovingly, at intervals, and Melanie listened to him with a thrilling yet happy heart.

In marrying again—to come to prosaic matters—she would lose more than half her settlements; but little matter now, if she lost them all!

All was well now, and LOVE'S LABOUR WAS WON!

Even poor Reggie, who had suffered so much in body and spirit, and whose very existence had proved so fatal a means of tyranny over Melanie, was getting better, under new medical care and happier auspices.

"No one—nothing can ever come between us, darling!" said Lonsdale, with infinite tenderness; "all our future lies in our own hands."

"Under God!" she added, as her head dropped on his breast.

Lonsdale's application to the Adjutant-General for leave to travel on the Continent was successful; and certainly he did so travel, but not alone.

The leave comes in most opportunely for the honeymoon trip—or, "wedding tour," as Melanie would call it, saying that "honeymoon was a ridiculous expression." And it did, perhaps, seem to them, as Whyte Melville has it—

That life is short, though love is life,
And so the tale is told.

THE END.

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